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by Allan K. Echols

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 15 August, 1951 Number 4

Feature Novel

THE MAVERICK MAKERS ..... Allan K. Echols 8
Law? Law here is just a token of good intentions. We have to enforce it ourselves, with our guns, if we want to live!

Short Stories

ACCIDENTLY ON PURPOSE ..... C. H. Cogswell 79
They thought Jeff Hardy lacked guts, because he hesitated to go for his guns. But Jeff's courage was of a different kind.

BULLETS FROM THE DUST ..... Lee Floren 88
Swamper Bill Roser knew the signs—McCracken was out to break the farmers, and he'd kill those who didn't run.

A COFFIN FOR DOGFACE ..... Richard Brister 97
Dogface Koons figured he'd run out those gent, O'Toole, just the way he'd ruined other competitors. But O'Toole could fight!

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE COWBOY ..... James A. Hines 106
It started in 1867, when a little cluster of log huts, named Abilene became the first shipping point for longhorn steers.

KILLER'S CARNIVAL ..... T. W. Ford 109
Gabby Sheets talked as if he'd known just about every longrider in the country. And everyone laughed, except one man...

NEVER CALL HIM WILLIE ..... Ben Frank 116
Willie was trying to run away from his weakness, but no one can run that fast, or that far. He'd have to face it here!

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*

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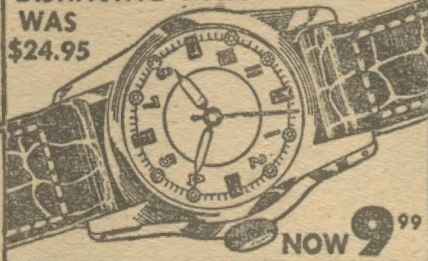

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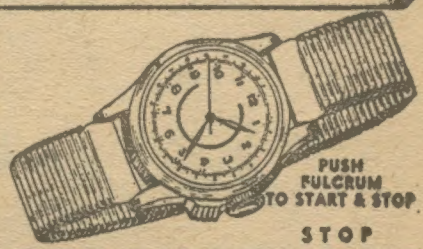

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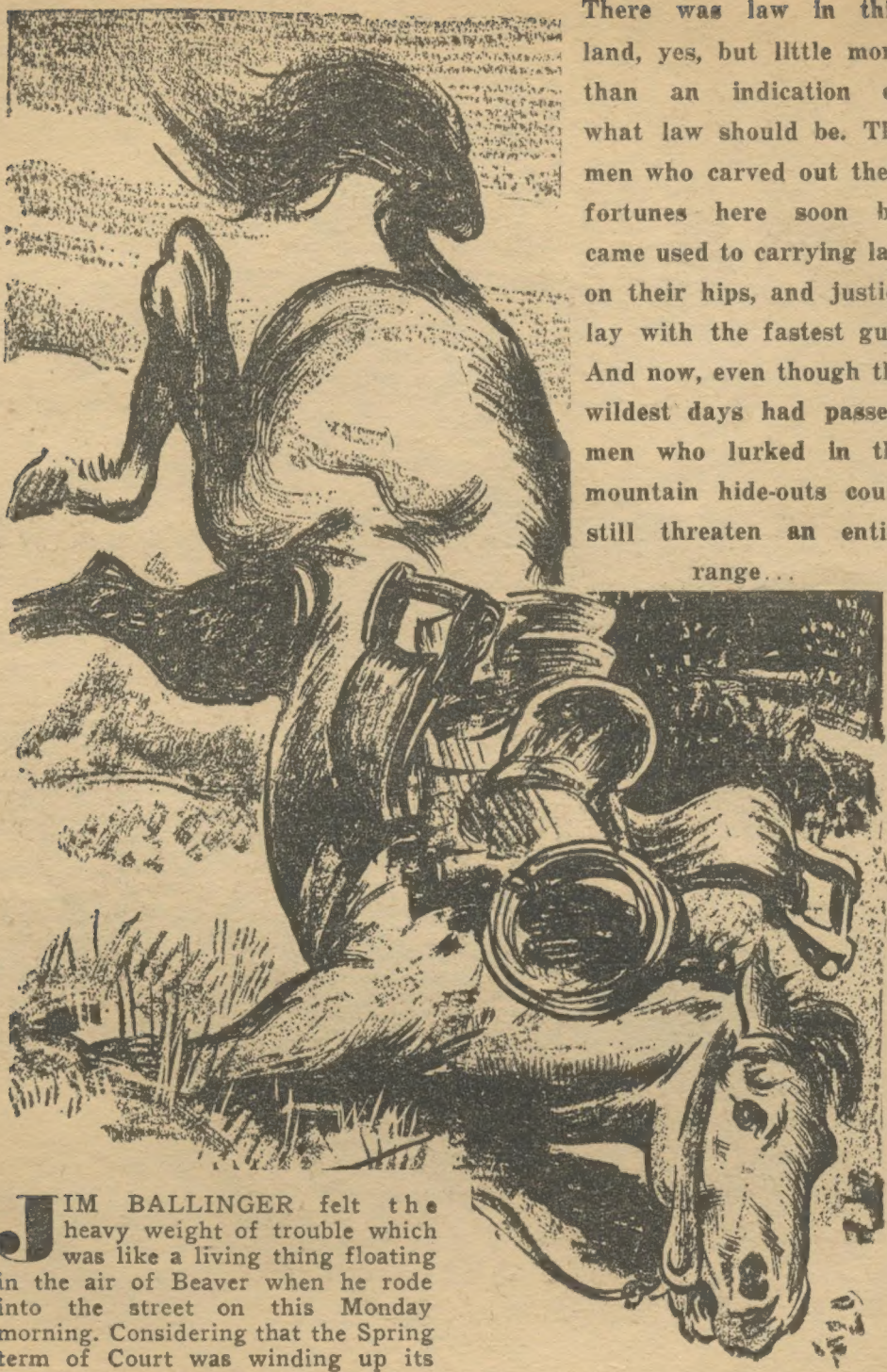


There was law in this land, yes, but little more than an indication of what law should be. The men who carved out their fortunes here soon became used to carrying law on their hips, and justice lay with the fastest gun. And now, even though the wildest days had passed, men who lurked in the mountain hide-outs could still threaten an entire range...

JIM BALLINGER felt the heavy weight of trouble which was like a living thing floating in the air of Beaver when he rode into the street on this Monday morning. Considering that the Spring term of Court was winding up its session, there were very few rigs on the street. Court week usually brought many ranchers and farmers into town.

Now Ballinger noticed that while there were few buggies, such as the womenfolk would have used, there were many saddled horses at the racks; his lips tightened as he read

MAVERICK MAKERS

BY ALLAN K. ECHOLS

The horse stumbled, and Shorty fell, heavily.

FEATURE NOVEL OF A KILLER'S RANGE

Byrd Kelton's Box K Brand on the hips of a large portion of them.

It was the presence of these horses. backing up Kelton's previously uttered threats, which accounted for the absence of the crowds that usually got into town during Court week. Men didn't want to expose their womenfolk to flying bullets.

Link Valentine was standing trial for the crime of killing a neighbor's cow and running a cinch-ring brand on the orphaned calf. The presence of these men now was a flexing of Kelton's muscles, either to intimidate the judge and jury, or to free Valentine—as they had threatened to do, if the jury gave him the sentence he deserved. It was not the cow and calf that mattered; they were merely symptoms of the deeper trouble that hung over the hills.

Ballinger tied his horse to a rack in front of Ed LaBosket's general store and stepped up into the shade of the awning while he fashioned a cigarette and let his eyes measure the street.

Starting at the stone courthouse directly across from him, his gaze swept up the half-dozen Kelton riders who squatted in a tight circle under the sycamore tree on the courthouse yard. Severely let alone by the few passing people who went into and out of the tan stone building, these armed men smoked and talked in low tones among themselves, at the same time keeping sharp eyes busy on the hot, quiet street. These men were planted here, Ballinger knew, as an outpost to head off any surprise by any band of little ranchers who might get together for action.

Up and down the street there was a man or two loafing on the wooden bench that sat in front of almost every store and saloon. Some of them were Kelton men; others were ranchers or hands working on the small ranches that spread out from the foot of the Jackfork mountains.

These other men were watching, too. Everybody was watching; everybody was waiting for the jury to come in with the verdict. Everybody was waiting to see what the verdict would be, and what the effect of it would be. Nerves were on edge, tempers at the bursting point.

The jury was an unknown quantity, expected in any minute to bear a verdict which would be a match applied to a fuse that could set off an explosion whose blast would rock the Jackfork Valley.

Jim Ballinger was a tall man on the near side of thirty. In the tight riding pants stuffed into his boots, and with the high tan Stetson on his head, he seemed to be a lean, loose-jointed and easy-going rider such as might be found in any bunkhouse hereabouts.

The differences between him and the average man who looked like him were not apparent to the casual glance. His shirt concealed wide flat shoulders and a chest overlaid with a sheath of whipcord muscle; the flat-planed face and square chin were made for laughing, and did not reveal the gravity and maturity which was his. His friends knew these things by long association with him, and respected the clear-headedness and iron that was in him; others hated him for it.

Having sized up the town, as he was in the habit of doing when trouble threatened, he dropped his cigarette and drifted down to the saloon. The drifting was only apparent; he was as alert as any sensible man would be when he knew that he was within reach of a powder keg with a burning fuse attached.

IN THE COOL shade of the saloon, there were only a handful of serious-faced and low-voiced men drinking at the bar. Pat Malone, the owner, came to bring him a bottle of cold beer.

"Verdict expected in yet?" Ballinger asked.

Pat was a youngish Irishman with a built-in smile, and prematurely gray hair combed straight back from a high red forehead. He shook his head negatively, and said, "What can you do?"

"For my part," the saloonman went on, "they can stay out. Either which way they decide, there'll be bury-

ing to do. Why can't you guys let the court make its decision and let it go at that? Suppose Link did steal a calf? Is that any reason to throw the country into a full-fledged war?"

Ballinger knew that Malone was not taking up the argument for Kelton. The owner was merely a peace-loving business man who did not want to see trouble hovering over the town.

"If that was all there was to it, that's what everybody would be glad to do," Ballinger answered. "But you know it's more than that; this mavericking has been going on for two years, and for a year everybody has been trying to catch the men who were doing it. They finally caught one of Kelton's men in the act, and they're trying to break it up lawfully by sending him to prison. It's not that one calf; it's a matter of about thirty percent of everybody's calf crop every year. And thirty percent of your calf crop can mean the difference between making a decent living or starving to death. That's what the branding of this one calf means, and you know it, Pat."

"Yeah, I reckon so," Pat grinned ruefully. "But I dread to think about it. Byrd Kelton says he won't let anything happen to one of his hands, and when Byrd says a thing, he means it."

"There you go," Ballinger said. "The rest of us can't afford to be bankruped by thieves, and we mean that, too. So—" He shrugged and changed the subject. "Didn't hear of any hands that want a job under the circumstances, did you?"

"Yeah, come to think of it," Pat said, ringing up Ballinger's money. "Some little, sawed-off fool was asking about a job a while ago. Hell of a place to look for one, if you ask me, and I told him so; but he said he liked that kind of work. Oh, here he comes now."

BALLINGER saw the man coming in through the swinging doors. The newcomer was slightly more than five feet tall in his high-heeled boots. His ears stuck out and his nose came to a long sharp point. His face was comical even when it had the serious purpose that seemed now to show in his washed-out blue eyes.

Pat Malone spoke to the newcomer. "Here's a man that might could use a hand."

"Mister," the short man said, "you don't know nobody that don't want to hire no hand that don't want to do too much work do you?"

"What kind of work do you like not to do best—or worst?" Ballinger glanced down at the man's well-worn gun and holster that nearly dragged the floor.

"Well, personally, I don't care what it is, so long as I don't have to get out of my saddle to do it. My feet and the ground ain't any too friendly. Oherwise, I can do just about anything."

"Where's your helper?" Ballinger asked gravely.

"Helper for what?"

"To lift the weight of that gun while you fire it."

"Well now, I've been short-handed on that business for some little time now. But I've rigged me up a block and tackle that kinda does the work in case there's a tree to swing the block from."

"Can you ride a full grown horse?"

"If somebody will hold him while I get on him," the man answered. "I reckon you've got a stepladder on your place for men to get on their horses with? I wouldn't want to work where they didn't have one."

"We're new around here and haven't got one built yet, but we will get you one," Ballinger answered. "In the meantime, the boys just climb a tree and let themselves down onto their horses. Think you could make out?"

"I reckon I could, for a while," Shorty said. "Do I get the job?"

"I'll give you a tryout if you want it," Ballinger said. "Hundred a month, board and bullets."

"That won't do," Shorty said. "I figure I'm worth a hundred and a quarter. But I hear a man can breathe a lot of clean fresh gunsmoke if he sticks around here, and

that is worth fifty a month to me. So that'll leave seventy-five a month you'll owe me. If that ain't all right, I don't want the job."

"I'll take a chance on you," Ballinger said. "Have a beer."

"I never drink *a* beer. Give me *two* beers."

They finished their beers as a pair of newly-acquainted men might do, then Ballinger said, "Come upstairs and I'll kind of give you a picture of what the job is like."

They went up the exposed stairway along the wall and came to a front room over the saloon. They pulled up chairs facing the window. so that the courthouse was before them.

Then for the first time, Ballinger and the weirdly-constructed new hand gave each other a friendly grin.

"Where the hell did you come from and how the hell did you ever find your way into this territory?" Ballinger asked. "Rob a bank or something?"

Shorty Madill grinned back at him. "Wasn't that ambitious," he answered. "Just happened I picked up a job on a cattle drive. Herd belonged to a fellow named Woodford and some of his friends. Saw some of them funny J. B. Connected brands on some of the stuff and he tells me that it belongs to a man named Jim Ballinger. Well, I asked him all about this Ballinger, and figured it was the same old fire-eater I used to ride through the Territory with when you was buying cattle down in Texas—pushing them through storm and gunsmoke up to Abilene, and I said to myself that I'd just come up and pay you a visit."

"That drive was made six months ago. Take you that long to find your way up here?"

"Well, I kinda lingered around some here and there. Gambler up around Fort Taylor tried to take my payday away from me with a slick-Ace poker deck. It turned out the sheriff owned a part of the man's gambling hall, and kinda resented having to bury his partner. Took me most of the winter to get out of jail."

"I knew it," Ballinger grinned. "Nobody comes here unless he's got a price on his head or a posse on his tail."

"That how you got here?"

"Sure. A fellow tried to fence Peaceable Creek so my trail herd couldn't drink unless I paid him. Turned out his cousin was the U. S. Deputy Marshal in that neighborhood, and I think he got sore about having to dig his cousin's grave in hard clay on a hot day."

"You're a liar," Shorty grinned. "But anyway, what's this trouble I hear about, and what do I do to get in on the party?"

BALLINGER took a serious tone. "It is not funny," he said. "A man name of Byrd Kelton is the head of a kind of clan of wild ones who came into the hills to escape whoever was after them down in the flatlands. He took up a lot of worthless mountain land, and claims to be a rancher. Registered his brand and everything. Their stunt is to pick off calves, drive them into the woods, and put Kelton's brand on 'em. Just plain mavericking. But in order to keep the supply of mavericks flowing, they kill off the mother cows."

"Manufacture their own mavericks, huh?"

"That's just it. We not only lose our calves, but we lose the breeding cows that are killed to keep them from following their stolen calves. And once a calf is driven up into the woods of these mountains, that's the last of it."

"Nice work," Shorty said. "That way, you never catch one of them driving a cow with another man's brand on it."

"No. We had to catch one of the Kelton boys in the act of killing the cow and branding the calf. We did that, and brought him in for the sheriff. There were two of the boys who caught him: Johnny Woodford and my foreman Gus Lindstrom. They'd naturally be the witnesses against the fellow they caught, man name of Link Valentine. Well, Kelton made his talk that Valentine was innocent, and that he wouldn't see him railroaded to prison. Fol-

lowing that, Johnny Woodford was found dead on the road near his house, drygulched. My foreman, Gus Lindstrom stayed alive to testify against Valentine; he disappeared last night on his way home from the trial, and I haven't seen him since. The jury is out now, and Kelton's men are in town. There's something likely to happen one way or another. You still want the job?"

"Where do we start?" Shorty asked. "I haven't had a good whiff of gunsmoke—"

"Since you killed the poker player, eh?" Ballinger said, getting to his feet. "We'll, here's what we intend to do—"

He was interrupted by a sudden fusillade of shots coming from across the street. He looked out the window and saw a man sticking his head out the second floor of the courthouse window, waving the pistol he had just fired, and shouting at the small group of Kelton's men who had been lounging on the grounds. Kelton's men had sprung into life, and were swarming toward the courthouse door.

Ballinger and Shorty watched them for a moment. The men reached the door, but did not go in. Instead they squared off in front of the entrance and stood there facing the street, each with his pistol out.

"Reckon what it means?" Shorty asked, excitement making him nervous.

"It means they've convicted Valentine, and that Kelton's men are taking him away from the sheriff. Come on, and be sure your gun is loaded."

2

BALLINGER raced down the stairs followed by Shorty. Out on the street they paused a moment. The street had come alive with the signal shots, and now men were running toward the courthouse in the open square.

The Kelton men, who had been idling in front of the various stores, made dashes for their horses tied at the hitchrails, while some of the smaller ranchers and cowboys were coming toward the trouble at a hurried pace.

At the moment four horsemen rode up alongside the courthouse, leading another bunch of half a dozen saddled horses. They cut across the courthouse yard and pulled up in front of the door, where the four Kelton men guarding the entrance took their horses and mounted, leaving two mounts as yet without riders.

Two of the men who had brought the horses turned their own mounts, raced out to the hitchracks in front of the courthouse and picked up another four animals which they led back to the steps of the building.

"Like clockwork," Shorty said with reluctant admiration; "they had it planned to the last detail."

Ballinger threw his gaze up and down the street. "Our boys are getting ready for them," he said. "They'll have a hot time taking the prisoner out through the door."

"I don't know," Shorty answered. "Look."

Ballinger saw what Shorty saw. Kelton had figured against any such a reception as had been planned for him, and had prepared for it.

Four of Kelton's men came out of the courthouse door in single file. Each man had his gun drawn, and had it resting on the shoulder of a woman whom he was using as a shield.

"Damn my soul!" Shorty cursed. "What do you know."

"Yeah," Ballinger grunted.

Each of Kelton's men had taken one of the women spectators in the courtroom, had forced her to walk before him, while he held his gun over her shoulder, covering the area ahead of him. Not a man on the street could have thrown a bullet at any one of them without hitting a woman.

Ballinger caught his breath in impotent rage as he saw how canny Kelton had been in making good his threat. He knew these women; three of them were the wives of small ranchers who had been victimized by

Kelton's gang, and had come to the trial in the hope of seeing justice done.

The fourth woman was being forced to walk directly in front of Link Valentine himself, who led the procession. She was June Adair, the district schoolteacher, who boarded with the Woodford family. Sight of the frightened girl's white face set Ballinger's blood boiling. It made the whole affair a personal matter to him.

"What do we do?" Shorty asked. "Take a chance on shooting over the women's heads? I might be able to draw a pretty fine bead—"

"No. Can't take a chance on their safety," Ballinger responded quickly. "Got to do something else. Where's your horse?"

"Down the street."

"Get him. And keep away from me. When those men hit for the hills, I want you to follow them. Find where they hang out, and try to get in with them. Whenever you learn something, find your way to my place and let me know what you have. You wanted a job; think that will keep you busy?"

"Sure. For a little while," Shorty grinned. "But how about my day off? Got any lions you want me to stick my head in their mouths and examine their teeth?"

"Get going," Ballinger answered. "I'm going to have a little talk with those crooks."

"Am I working for a fool?" Shorty objected. "Them men have got guns. Guns can hurt a man. You know?"

"Get going," Ballinger repeated, and started across the now paralyzed street, heading directly toward the group at the courthouse door.

PAT MALONE stuck his head out through the butterfly doors of the saloon, watched Ballinger, and said to Shorty. "What's he doing?"

"Trying to kill hisself so's not to have to pay me the wages he promised."

Malone made a speculative noise deep in his throat. "Ballinger is a fast thinker," he said. "But I'll be damned if I see how he's going to think himself through half a dozen pistols. Why didn't you stop him?"

"You don't know Jim Ballinger, or you wouldn't have asked that question," Shorty answered, then started down the street after his horse as he had been ordered to do.

The street had come to a sudden stillness as the little ranchers saw Kelton's strategy. There was not a man of them who would have risked taking a shot at the bandits, so long as they had the womenfolk before them for protection.

Now as they saw Ballinger walking through the dust toward them, the whole scattered group of them stood in their various positions, helpless to do anything; surprised; and expecting to see him fall dead at any step.

The street was breathless with the suspense of it; what could Ballinger do against those eight guns? He couldn't even shoot in self-defense when they opened up on him, for fear of hitting one of the women. Everybody knew Ballinger well enough to know he realized that, himself. And yet, the man kept walking, while the grim silence hung heavy and the tension built up tighter in the street.

The little line of bandits in front of the courthouse saw him coming; instinctively they stopped their progress toward the horses, waiting with their guns trained on the approaching Ballinger, puzzled as to his intentions. They knew that he would not shoot into the women; they had based their plans on that very fact. And yet he came toward them, walking with that long easy stride of his, thumbs hooked into the belts of his two guns, his hat on the back of his head in an almost casual manner.

There were men who knew that crooked smile on his face, and realized that it presaged trouble. But these Kelton men were not familiar with that single giveaway in his expression.

Ballinger did not stop in his approach, but walked between a couple of horses and came to a stop within almost arm's length of Link Valentine, who led the procession.

VALENTINE'S long concave body was hidden behind the ample clothing of the schoolteacher, so that his lean face and his high hat only were visible behind the pert little hat on June Adair's head. Valentine's green eyes were narrowly watching Ballinger, his long mustaches twitching, and his thumb nervous on the hammer of his gun. He sensed that something was going wrong with the plan Kelton had assured him meant easy escape.

"You'd better stop, Ballinger," Valentine growled. "What do you want here?"

"I didn't come to see you," Ballinger answered easily. "I came to speak to the ladies."

Then taking his gaze away from Valentine as though dismissing him entirely from his mind, he looked at the schoolteacher. "Miss Adair," he said. "These men won't harm you. Just walk away from them and go over to LaBosket's store. The rest of you ladies do the same. I'll guarantee that these men won't shoot you if you leave them now."

Valentine spoke for his group. "Listen here, Ballinger. We got these here women for protection, and we ain't going to let 'em go. If one of them so much as starts to try to get away from us, we'll shoot 'em dead."

It was a woman named Samples who spoke up. "They've got us, Mr. Ballinger. If we was to try to get away, they'd shoot us sure. They might shoot us anyway."

"That's what they want you to think," Ballinger assured her. "But let me show you why they won't. You probably didn't think of it, and I've got an idea that neither did Kelton. You see your husbands and your friends around here, all of them with guns?"

Valentine growled, "Sure they see 'em. That's why we brought the women along, to keep their husbands from raising their guns against us."

"That's right, Mr. Ballinger," the Samples woman said.

"She knows what would happen," Valentine boasted. "You see, we got you outsmarted."

"Yeah," Ballinger agreed. "Maybe." He knew that he had to be very careful to make the women see his reasoning, and to believe implicitly in it, or he could never get them away from Valentine's group.

"What do you suppose your husbands and friends would do to these men who helped this man break jail if they didn't have you as hostages?" he asked. He addressed this question to the young woman who had been the wife of the man Valentine had killed.

"They would kill them, I suppose. But that doesn't do us any good. The fact is, they *have* got us."

"That's right, so far," Ballinger agreed. "But if they killed you, they wouldn't have any hostages, would they? And if they didn't have any hostages, then they would be killed before they got on their horses. Isn't that so?"

"Why—yes," one of the women answered.

"So," Ballinger said. "The fact is, that they wouldn't dare kill you. The very minute they killed you, they'd have destroyed their only protection. They'd be dead as quick as half a hundred bullets could reach them, and their bodies would be dragged down the street at the end of lariats. Now you ladies just walk away from these two-bit thieves. They haven't got any too much sense at best, but they've at least got sense enough to know that the first one of them that pulls a trigger signs the death warrants for himself and all his friends. Just step out, ladies, and go on over to LaBosket's."

IT WAS June Adair whose quick mind had followed Ballinger's reasoning to its inevitable conclusion, and who made the first decision.

She jerked her arm loose from the grip that Link Valentine had on it and stepped away, facing him. "I don't think you are in such a hurry to die that you'd dare shoot me," she said. "If you want to try it, go ahead."

The girl squared her shoulders bravely, turned her back on the killer and walked away, throwing a

glance at Jim Ballinger that contained gratitude and an unspoken message.

Valentine, now standing exposed at the head of his group, was nonplussed. His long mustaches trembled. He looked at Ballinger, at the hands that rested on Ballinger's belts six inches from the handles of a pair of guns. His puzzled gaze swept the street, seeing a dozen or twenty men standing back watching the play, ready to fill the air with lead the first moment the action called for it.

Link Valentine's eyes went to the straight back of the girl who had walked away from him, and rested there in a kind of dazed glassiness. The whole play had been too subtle for his slow mind; he still didn't know exactly what had taken place.

But the other women had followed Ballinger's reasoning in their own way. They had seen June Adair take the lead without any fatal results; that was enough for them.

As they broke away from the other three men, one of the women, a small stout woman in glasses, turned and slapped her captor, big Mack Stitch, a resounding blow on the face, then marched across the street toward LaBosket's with the perpendicular feather in her hat bouncing angrily at every step.

As the women walked to freedom across the street and went into LaBosket's store, the whole street seemed to freeze like a covey of quail in the presence of a snake.

The men who encircled the courthouse yard had seen the womenfolk miraculously saved from abduction; the surprise of this still held them puzzled, for they had not heard the reasoning with which Ballinger had freed them.

The only thing they saw was the group of armed bandits and their horses near the open doors of the courthouse— Jim Ballinger standing alone, facing their drawn guns while his own two weapons still rested in their holsters below the hands that he held casually on his hips as he watched them.

Ballinger was watching two of the four men: Link Valentine, the prisoner whose escape they had effected, and Mack Stitch.

Stitch was Kelton's foreman and right-hand man. He was two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of bone and muscle and animal cunning—a perfect tool for the work that the canny Byrd Kelton's agile brain devised. The strongest and most brutal of the outlaws, he was the one to keep Kelton's lesser men in line.

Stitch was the man to watch, for the rest would not act except as he directed or indicated. It was Stitch whose bullish temper might explode the tense situation.

The Kelton men were still standing as they had frozen when Ballinger had brought them to a stop. None of them had quite realized what had happened to turn their simple jail delivery into such a quick and bloodless failure. And none of them would make a move without a sign or word from Stitch.

BALLINGER deliberately let the silence settle around him while he stood facing them. They were waiting for him to make some move which would break the spell; he was waiting for the confusion and uncertainty to build up in their minds, as he knew it would. Men who have suddenly stumbled on defeat are in no shape to think clearly.

Back of the immobile group, the small ranchers stood and waited, as puzzled as the bandits, but ready at the first sign of shooting to pull their guns and spring into action. Ballinger knew this; the bandits knew this; and particularly, Stitch knew this.

The poised readiness built up into almost an unsufferably tight tableau, and still Ballinger did not say another word; he stood lightly on his toes with his hands resting above his gunbutts.

The seconds ticked off slowly; the tension became at last unbearable. Two or three of Kelton's men shifted their feet nervously, but still no word had been spoken.

Ballinger kept his eyes on Stitch now, and he could see in the man's

small eyes that Stitch was boiling inside. He had been publicly slapped in the face by a little fat woman, and had not opened his mouth to speak even a word of protest. That slap could destroy him. Stitch knew that only his big fists and the threat of his gun could keep him from becoming a laughingstock. He had to redeem himself in the presence of these men; he had to turn Ballinger's victory into defeat.

And yet Mack Stitch could not think of a way to do this. He had seven men with him; there were eight of them against the man standing in front of him. They could shoot him down, true. Ballinger could not outshoot eight men and come out alive; he was not a miracle man.

But what would Ballinger be doing in the meantime? He was a lightning shot; no man in the world could shoot him dead before he could at least draw those two guns hovering under his hands and send a few lethal bullets against his attachers.

Stitch did not mind losing a man or two if it would cost that much to kill Ballinger, who had been a thorn in Kelton's side for a long time. The big question in Stitch's mind was this: who would be the ones Ballinger killed before he died?

And Stitch knew the answer to the big question without having to ask Ballinger. He knew that Ballinger's guns would be trained on him, for he was the boss of the Kelton men. Ballinger was looking squarely at Stitch; Ballinger did not have to tell him any more plainly who he was going to shoot at when those guns went flying into his hands from his holster.

One other thought came to Stitch. Suppose that through some miracle, he or his men killed Ballinger before Ballinger could get his guns blazing. What then?

The answer to that one came to Stitch all too clearly. With Ballinger down, that circle of little ranchers had no reason to withhold their fire any longer. These eight men standing along before the courthouse steps would be cut down like Johnson Grass under the sicklebar of a mowing machine.

Stitch turned his attention back to the man in front of him, hoping that Ballinger would make some move that would suggest a counter move by himself. But Ballinger stood and waited, silent, alert, as still and with a mind as impenetrable as the statue of a frontiersman. It was maddening.

Stitch could take the uncertainty no longer. He forced a tight grin to his face and spoke to Ballinger. "Well," he said nervously. "Kinda looks like a Mexican standoff, don't it? We start on you and you'll get some of us. You start on us and we'll finish you off. Can't neither of us win, can we? Want to call it a draw?"

Ballinger did not let the expression change on his face. "What kind of a draw?"

"Why, we all turn our backs to you and get on our horses and ride home without taking a shot at you or anybody, and you let us ride without shooting us in the back. Okay?"

"Not quite," Ballinger answered. "You happen to have delivered a prisoner out of the courthouse. I can't speak for the sheriff, but I'll go this far with you. Have Link Valentine drop that gun you gave him, and stand hitched. Then the rest of you can ride for the hills. If the sheriff comes after you, that's between you and him. But there hasn't been time to place a charge against you yet, so I won't be violating any law in not holding you."

It was Link Valentine himself who voiced the objection to this. "They've got a murder charge trumped up against me. Leaving me here would be like hanging me."

"Stitch might want to come in and get you again. You stay here in jail where you belong, or there's no deal," Ballinger answered.

STITCH WAS thinking this over, and that is why he let Link go on and do the talking, hoping that something the two might say in their argument might give him an idea which would save them.

Link went on "You can't make us do anything we don't want to do. You'd be dead the minute we opened up on you, no matter how good you are with a gun. All Stitch has got to do is say the word."

"Stitch is not going to say the word." Ballinger answered easily. "Stitch is not going to sign his own death warrant just to save your hide; ask him if I'm not right."

Stitch was silent a long while. His eyes were on the ground one moment, then on Ballinger, then sweeping the silent men with guns who stood watching him from a hundred feet away. He was weighing his chances, and his chances had no weight at all; they did not exist.

Then Stitch said with sudden decision. "Link we're going to leave you here for the time being. But we'll take care of you. Don't worry about that."

"But—"

"But nothing. I'm giving the orders, and if you want to save your hide, then do what I tell you."

"But why—"

"Shut up. Just do as I tell you. We won't forget you; just drop your gun on the sidewalk while we ride away."

Link Valentine started a third protest, caught the look of warning on Stitch's face, and dropped his gun, grumbling as he did so.

Stitch shoved his weapon into his pouch and spoke to the others. "They won't hurt Link; get your horses and let's get moving."

The men pouched their weapons and mounted their horses, giving Ballinger their hard looks, but not speaking.

Mack Stitch pulled his big black gelding up alongside Ballinger and looked down on him from his seat in the saddle. He had his reins in his left hand and his right fist on his hip. There was a peculiar look on his coarse face, a mixture of anger, cunning and anticipatory cruelty.

"Just like that, huh?" he said. "You step right up and make a hero out of yourself and live happily ever after." He snapped his fingers with a disdainful grunt. "Just like that and it's all over. Huh?"

"No, Stitch," Ballinger answered evenly. "Just like that, and it's only started. You'd better ride on out while you can; you always did talk too much."

The big man laughed roughly and spurred his horse off the courthouse grounds and down the street, followed by his cavalcade of cutthroats and cattlethieves. They took the road to Pinetop, their own little private town.

3

AS THE mountain men disappeared from view in a cloud of dust, hitting a rapid pace toward the wooded hillside, there was a concerted movement of ranchers toward Ballinger, who had turned toward the courthouse door, and was heading Valentine before him.

Troy Laney, a young man who, with his sister Madge, operated the TL ranch, was one of the first to reach him.

"That was the craziest stunt I ever saw," he protested. "Why they didn't kill you dead, I'll never know."

"No it wasn't," Ballinger answered. "I just showed them something they had missed seeing when they made their plans." Then he told them briefly of the point he had made.

"What it amounts to," said Bert Woodford, brother of the man who had been killed by Valentine, "is that Ballinger put himself up to be shot down so the women could escape and we could get a shot at Stitch and his men."

Ballinger laughed that one off. "What it amounted to was that Stitch didn't want to die."

A crowd began pouring from the courthouse, where they had remained while the danger existed. Sheriff Costigan was in the lead, and Bert Woodford told him what had happened outside.

Then Ballinger asked, "How did Stitch manage to get his hands on Valentine?"

"I was sitting back of Link at the prisoner's table," Costigan explained. "Then I felt a gun in my back. One of Stitch's men—I never saw him before, and therefore wasn't watching him—was covering me. Stitch and the others got up out of their seats, threw Link a gun while this other fellow, and still another one, got up on the judge's bench facing the room and covered us all. We men couldn't do anything for fear the shooting would hurt some of the women."

Ballinger suddenly whirled around, driven by some unconscious warning. Valentine had seized the moment when attention was off him, had taken one quick step and swept his gun up off the ground where it had lain forgotten for the moment.

Ballinger saw the gun rising in front of Valentine's twisted face. His own hand streaked for his weapon, though even as he whipped it out he had the feeling that he was too late. He triggered the gun instinctively just as it leveled up out of his holster.

He heard his own gun and Valentine's as they roared in unison. Valentine's gun was still smoking as it sailed out of his hand and landed in the grass behind him, leaving Valentine nursing a bloody fist.

Ballinger had felt a slight tug at his elbow. Valentine's bullet had merely touched his sleeve.

Now the sheriff's gun was out, backed by the guns of half a dozen men around him. Costigan held up a warning hand as he read the faces of those who wanted to kill Valentine and settle the matter here and there.

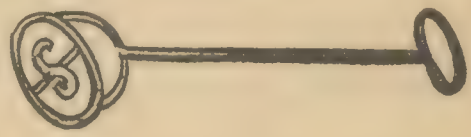
"Let him be," the officer warned. "I've got him."

He looked at Link Valentine. "All right, Link, we'll go on back to the jail now, and I'll try to see that you don't make any more breaks."

BALLINGER turned back to Laney, who was standing with Luther Cole, another of the ranchers. "Troy, I had to let Stitch get away to avoid a pitched battle here where some innocent people might get hurt. I've been looking all over for Gus Lindstrom, and haven't got a trace of him yet. I want to keep on looking; he might be lying dead or wounded somewhere. Will you and Luther get these men organized, and search all the flats from the foot of the mountains. I'm heading into the mountains, myself. Too risky there for a crowd."

"Sure," Laney answered "We've got to find him or we haven't got a murder case against Valentine."

"I'm going to try," Ballinger promised; "I'll get in touch with you when I get back."



Laney walked a few steps with him, and spoke in a low voice. "Look here, Jim," he said. "I know what you think of Gus. We all like the big ox. But if—well, you know, if you find that anything's happened, don't bust out of the traces and go on a one-man warpath. Kelton would like for you to do something like that, and give him a chance to burn you down. He's more afraid of you than all the rest of us put together. Wait and let's all work together. It's safer."

Ballinger laughed at him and kept on walking. "I'll try to take care of my precious hide," he promised, and went on across the street to La-Bosket's.

He found June Adair waiting for him in a chair in front of the dress-goods counter. She was seated at the window where she could have seen all that had happened. Her face was a little pale, her hands gripped her handbag. "Are you through with your fighting?" she asked him.

Ballinger did not answer for a moment, his mind being occupied with drinking in the look of her. You couldn't escape the fact that she was an Easterner, though the Territory sun had stored some of its brightness in the almost transparent skin of her patrician face. And the sky had found in her eyes a rival

for its blueness. She did not belong in this country, and yet the country was better, was more civilized for her presence. Her dignity was a natural thing that did not intrude on one, but somehow managed to fold her in a cloak which was difficult of penetration.

She looked at him questioningly, and he tore his thoughts away from his hungry appraisal of her and gave her an answer.

"Yes," he answered. "The man is back in jail; it wasn't anything of importance."

Her eyes told him that she did not accept his effort to pass the incident off so lightly. "Whenever you're ready to go," she said evenly, "I'm ready. Or do you have more business here?"

"I'm through here. I'll drive you to Woodward's, and go on home; I've got a trip to make as soon as I can get started."

HE BROUGHT the Woodward buggy from the hitchrail down the street and, leading his horse behind, drove out of town with the girl sitting silently beside him. The silence continued so long that he finally turned and looked squarely at her. She was looking off into the hills to the right.

"Well," he said, "you've got another lesson in life in Indian Territory. What do you think of it?"

She did not look at him, but kept her gaze in the distance. "I think it is brutal," she said with a quiet strength in her voice. "Absolutely brutal and unnecessary."

"What part of it was brutal and unnecessary?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"All of it. In the first place if everybody had wantd to act civilized, the whole thing wouldn't have happened. If Johnny and your foreman had actually seen that Valentine man kill one of Mr. Woodford's cows and brand the calf, they could have gone to him and made him pay for the damage he had done. Or they could have gone to their lawyer and had him collect. And if the man wouldn't pay, than they could have sued him. That would have been the civilized and legal thing to do."

Ballinger looked at the magic loveliness of her for a surprised moment. The laugh which had started in him was caught before it reached his face. She was serious, terribly serious, and very much concerned; he could tell that by the tone of her voice. The escape, perhaps, had upset her more than she knew. She was trying to make excuses for the men who had without a doubt given her the most upsetting adventure of her protected life.

"No, June, we could not have sued him. He was caught stealing. Our friends tried to take him in, and he refused to come in with them. So there was a fight, and Johnny Woodford was killed. It is bad. Bad for Mr. Woodford and for us all, but that's the way it was, and it couldn't be helped."

"It *could* be helped," she answered vehemently. "There is never an excuse for fighting. People can always settle their troubles if they'll only go about it in a sensible and civilized manner."

Ballinger had to smile this time. She had turned toward him in her earnestness, and she saw that smile. "You think I'm talking like a baby, don't you?" she said quickly, spots of pink coming into her cheeks.

"No, you're not talking like a baby, you're talking like an idealist. June, your ideas would be right and proper back in Illinois. But this is new country; there are bad men here, men who have no use for the law even if there were any law—"

"But there is law! What about Sheriff Costigan? What about the court, and the judge and the jury? It's their business to settle things like this. That's what law is for!"

"Yes—it is, in theory. But you can't place a charge against a man until you catch him violating a law. We caught Valentine, and he's the first one we have caught while we've been being robbed blind for a year or more. Then when you catch a thief, you've got to take him in and prove before a jury of people that he was guilty."

"Well, that's what the courts are for," the girl argued. "They convicted him of killing that cow and stealing that calf."

"True. But he's just a small potato in this trouble, and he hasn't even been tried on the murder charge yet. Convict him and hang him, and you still haven't scratched the surface of the trouble. He's just one of Byrd Kelton's hirelings. Kill him, and Kelton's got a dozen others to take his place. Kill them and Kelton will get other dozens."

"Then arrest Mr. Kelton."

"June, we have one old man who is sheriff, and he sometimes has a deputy and sometimes hasn't. He can't go out and ask Kelton to admit he had a hand in stealing some cattle, and will he please come in and stand trial. And for that matter, it's as likely as not that Kelton never killed a one of those cows with his own hand, nor drove off one of those calves. He has men to do that; he just runs things. There's only one way to stop it and that is to catch Kelton in a guilty act and kill him and kill his men or drive them out of the country There's no other way in this kind of country, June."

"There's always a peaceful way," she rejoined.

She was gazing off at the peaks of the Jackforks as they rode along. "Those hills," she said musingly. "They're beautiful and green and peaceful. The creeks come pouring down out of them icy cold and clear as crystal. The deer live in peace up there in the trees, and the quail whistle and the doves sing songs down in the meadows. This is beautiful country, Jim, and peaceful—except for the people who live in it. You make your own troubles. You invite bloodshed. There are ways of doing things in a civilized manner, but you people don't use those ways. You feel that you have no law protecting you, so you take the law into your own hands. And because the country is new and wild and primitive, you revert to primitive ways. You shed each other's blood when it is not necessary. It is a terrible thing that men should do that to a country—and to themselves."

Ballinger was quiet for a moment. "And is that why I can't convince you of the wisdom of your marrying me? Do you think that I'm some kind of primitive savage, stalking men with guns, looking for a chance to wash the gentle prairie with the blood of innocent men?"

She countered with her own question.

"You shot a man a while ago; just exactly what were your thoughts about it when you saw his blood dripping from his mangled hand?"

"Why," he answered, puzzled and wary. "I don't suppose I thought much about it one way or another. There wasn't anything to think about. He picked up a gun and he would have killed some of us, so I just had to shoot him loose from his gun. There wasn't anything to it that I could see."

"That's it! There is your answer. You see what this country does to you? You can shoot a man in cold blood, and you don't see that there is anything to it. That isn't all there is to it. It's not the right or wrong of keeping a prisoner from escaping; it's what it means to you, who did the shooting. It meant nothing to you; you didn't think there was anything to it."

He gave up. She had been in this country less than a year, coming out to teach school, a job secured for her by her uncle, old Jeff Woodford. She was all right; she was everything that Jim Ballinger dreamed of in a woman, but the very strength of her convictions made it difficut for her to understand the way men had to do things in this new country, where the law was hardly more than a token of what law should be.

THE BUGGY was moving along the foot of the twisting Jackforks, the road bordered with virgin oak and pine greening the rocky mountainsides on their right, and a carpet of lush grass knee-high to a man on horseback on their left. They crossed cold spring-fed streams pouring down out of the mountainsides and snaking their twisting tree-bordered way across the prairies. It was truly a beautiful country, a rich country, with natural feed and water for more cattle than the Ter-

ritory would see for many a year.

That was the prairie side of the road; that was the side of the road she had seen. She did not know what the other side was like. The Jackfork Mountains were an impenetrable maze of deer trails, pinnacles and hidden valleys which swallowed up men so completely that once a man's horse disappeared into the woods he could lose himself from an army if he so chose.

The Jackforks was the home of the wild bunch, the haven of every wanted man in Indian Territory who needed a temporary or permanent

retreat from the hand of the law. The Territory's few Federal officers left that vast region carefully alone, for no man could safely ride its wooded trails without constant exposure to a shot in the back from any man who had any reason for wanting to pull a trigger on him. Few men other than the owlhooters knew their way around in these mountains, and no one of them could possibly have known all its mysteries.

It was beautiful scenery from a distance. Yet in the darkness of those wooded hills dwelt a seething mass of humanity whose lives were black as deertrails on a dark night.

Here thieves and murderers dwelt in safety from the law, living their own lives, enforcing their own wishes with guns and knives, hiding their crimes from the world, emerging only to prey on men who were foolish enough to work for a living.

They were the natural enemies of those who had the ambition to carve a civilized home out of this land. Here the man with the gun and his own concept of law found his own promised land. Here he had nobody to fear except those hardy little ranchers on whom he preyed when he needed a few cattle to sell.

And these men, Ballinger thought, *stand between me and the girl riding beside me.* He pulled the buggy up into Woodford's big ranch yard. Handle these men as a business man would handle a competitor, with big words out of a lawbook spoken before a senile man in a black robe, and you have civilization. You spoke the right words and the wild bunch would sneak back to the hills and behave themselves.

That was the way she would have it; she could not love a man who met gun with gun, who felt that the only practical way in this country to get rid of a thief was to get rid of him and get it over.

HE HELPED June out of the buggy while a wrangler came up from somewhere at the back and took it away. He stood by his horse, and the girl stood by and laid a hand on his arm.

For a moment he saw something revealed in her eyes; it might have been pain, he feared that it might have been pity, and he hoped that it might have been a quickly hidden feeling more personal. But it fled before the smile she forced on herself.

"Jim, I'm sorry. I wish you'd try to believe me when I say how much I like you. You have so much that I admire in a man. But—"

"Yes, I know," he interrupted, the momentary bitterness making his voice cold and almost harsh. "We're pretty uncivilized out here. Well, some day, we may get some of the rough edges rubbed off. Take care of Mother Woodford, will you? She's taking Johnny's death pretty hard; I'll see you around."

He threw himself into his saddle almost angrily, and spurred out of the ranchyard, not waiting to see Johnny Woodford's mother; he reached home in another half hour.

And when he rode up to his corral he saw the saddled horse, saw the man tied like a sack of meal across

the animal's back. It was the body of Gus Lindstrom, face down across the seat of his own saddle, his feet tied to his stirrup strap on one side, and his wrists tied to the stirrup strap on the other.

Gus Lindstrom had a bullet hole in his forehead, and several other bullet holes in his chest. His face was beaten and swollen out of recognition, which must have happened before he was shot. His body was stiff when Jim Ballinger took it off the horse and carried it, doubled over his shoulder to the bunkhouse.

As anybody would have known, and as somebody had planned when they killed Gus and tied his body on his own horse, the animal had come straight home from wherever this had happened.

He had come home from the hills to bring the remains of Gus Lindstrom back as a warning to the men of the valley.

4

THERE WERE twenty or more people at Ballinger's the next morning when they buried Gus Lindstrom under the big willow down by the spring. But Ballinger hardly knew what they were doing; he had no recollection of time since he discovered the body of Gus. He did not remember riding out to his nearest line camp, picking up Charlie Steele and asking him to find Laney's searching party and bring them in. He did not remember that he came back frozen-faced and unable to feel.

Last night he had picked up a full quart of whiskey off his kitchen shelf and a tin cup, had gone out and sat down on the wooden bench under the sycamore tree. That had been at about sundown. When the neighbors began to arrive soon after daylight, he was still sitting there with an elbow on his knee and his head in his hand, staring blankly at the ground around him littered with cigarette stubs. The first quart bottle was lying on its side empty; another was hardly more than half full.

He did not see the people when they arrived; he did not get up and go to meet them. When they came by to say a word to him, they saw how it was with him and understood; they did not linger to talk. They went on about holding the funeral, and he did not get up and go to take a last look at the body of his friend.

June Adair had come along in the buckboard with Mrs. Woodford and her husband and young Bert. They all stopped for a moment at the sycamore where Ballinger sat, hardly conscious of their presence.

Old Jeff saw how things were, and nodding to his son, they went on to take their turns with the pick and shovel at the grave. Mrs. Woodford tried to say something to Jim, and saw that it was no use.

Ballinger looked up briefly at her and June, and nodded absently. June stood uncertainly, her eyes swiftly taking in the whisky bottles and Ballinger's dazed condition. Mrs. Woodford saw the mixed emotions in the girl and took her by the arm, quickly leading her away.

Out of earshot of Jim, the old woman explained kindly. "He's a good man, June. He and Gus have been like brothers all their lives; Jim's hard hit."

The girl's face now clearly revealed her puzzlement. "But drinking, getting drunk when his best friend is being buried. I don't understand—"

"No, you don't understand. He's not drunk. In his condition a gallon of whiskey wouldn't make him drunk," Mrs. Woodford said. "Men in this country don't wear their emotions on their coat-sleeves. When strong people are bad hurt, they somehow manage to dam up their feelings inside themselves, and the hurt that is going on in them is so great that they couldn't bear it without something to dull the pain. He's not being disrespectful to Gus; he is just going through his own private hell. I know how it is. It would be a relief to him if he could just break down and cry like a baby, but Jim is a big man, June. He is

wide and deep, like a great river. The currents that run in him are hid deep under the surface, but they are powerful."

"Everybody seems to think a lot of him," the girl admitted.

"They do. It is men like Jim who will build this country; it will grow rich feeding on their blood and bones."

As the two women walked toward the group of other neighbors, June turned her head and laid a long inscrutable look on the man who sat on the bench, staring unseeingly at the ground.

AFTER THE funeral, Troy Laney found young Bert Woodford and got him aside. "Look here, Bert," he said. "We've got to do something about Jim. This thing has got stuck inside of him somehow, and we've got to get it out. We'd better figure some way to get that bottle away from him. One of us get to talking to him or something, and the other one grab it. Hit him if you have to, but don't let him get it back."

"He'd be better off if we'd knock him unconscious for a while," Woodford said; "sleep would do him good."

The two men went around the house to the sycamore tree. The bench was empty. They searched the place until at the barn they found that Ballinger's horse and saddle were gone.

Troy shook his head as they came back from the corral. "He's gone after Kelton," he said, "and you couldn't find him in a thousand years. Jim knows those trails like an Indian, and he won't stop this side of Pinetop."

"And that'll make three dead," Bert said tightly. "Kelton will kill him for sure."

●

When Ballinger first began to be conscious of his surroundings he found himself lying on the ground with his saddle for a pillow. He opened his eyes and found that he was in a clump of elderberry bushes. Looking upward through the bushes, he could see that there was a little daylight seeping through the tops of large pine trees.

He closed his eyes again and began to wonder where he was and how he got there. His memory refused to function for a while, but then, reluctantly it started feeding him shadowy pictures. The pictures had little meaning to him at first, but gradually they worked themselves into a pattern. Now he remembered finding Gus' body. He had a vague picture of a lot of people coming to his house for a funeral.

Mrs. Woodford and June had been there... June had stood and looked at him with some kind of an expression on her face. Remembering now that he had been sitting under the tree and drinking all night, he knew what that expression must have been. Cowboys who had had too much to drink disgusted her; she had told him so a couple of times when she had seen them cutting up like kids at dances to which he had taken her. Well, he had lost her anyway. He wasn't civilized enough for her. Wouldn't he look funny in one of those black suits with long tailed coats and a stiff white collar?... It didn't matter... Right now he didn't even feel that old pain at the loss of her. He didnt feel anything; the drinking hadn't done much good, because he still felt dead inside, like the burned out heart of an old deadfall tree.

Ballinger rolled over and crawled out of the elders, looking around to try to find out where he was. The pines here were so big around that you couldn't have encircled them with your arms. He was pretty high up in the mountains; that was a certainty. And his horse must be around somewhere, because he had slept on his saddle; Jim walked around, his instinct leading him upward along the gentle slope.

And then he stopped short. He had almost walked right out onto the road running through Pinetop.

Jake's Store stood right across the road from him, a two-story sun-

warped old building of pine boards and a shakes roof with a small curl of smoke pouring out of a rusty stove-pipe chimney.

NOW AS he stood in the concealment of the trees, the whole story came back to Jim Ballinger. He had come up here to find Byrd Kelton and answer the challenge that Kelton had flung at him when he had tortured and killed Gus, then sent his body home on his horse.

And now Jim remembered that he had slipped away from home during the funeral because Troy Laney and the others would have objected to his coming up here, into Kelton's territory, alone. He had got this far somehow, during the darkness, and apparently had decided to wait till daylight to go on.

Now Ballinger wondered how he felt about the whole business; he searched himself and found that he had no feeling at all. He still didn't feel any hurt at the death of Gus, he didn't feel any hurt at the loss of June; he was just dead inside. There was nothing in him that he could recognize except the fixed idea that he had to find Byrd Kelton and kill him. That was all; he didn't even feel any anger at Kelton: He just knew that he was hunting Kelton to kill him.

Now Ballinger wondered how he Jim realized that though he had got some sleep and was refreshed, he couldn't remember when he had eaten last. There was a gnawing hunger in his belly. He would probably have a long look for Kelton. There was no telling where the man might be, and Ballinger wouldn't be able to get any information about Kelton from Jake. Jake wouldn't have been alive if he were the kind that told anybody about anything; you just didn't do that around these mountains.

Ballinger turned back and hunted afoot until he found his horse tied out in a patch of grass by a spring. He couldn't remember tying the animal up. He saddled and brought the animal to the edge of the woods, found a narrow trail and tied him there, handy for a quick move if it were necessary. He had to get into Jake's, buy some food of some kind, and get out again in a hurry before any of the wild bunch might recognize him.

He came out of the woods and made his way across the dust of the road, reached the porch of Jake's and had his hand on the door before he looked up and down the road.

There was nothing much to see. Just a few pine shacks, some without doors, all gray and warped. This was an old lumbering camp, but there was no longer a sawmill by the big sawdust dump in the clearing, a hundred or so yards up from the store.

The wild bunch had the cautious habit of hanging out in cabins away from the settlement; but, once in a while, some of those who got too drunk on Jake's sugar whiskey stayed over in one of the shacks or in one of Jake's upstairs rooms. There were none of these boys on the road this morning; Ballinger went into Jake's and closed the door behind him.

Jake was putting two plates of meat and eggs on a table at the rear of the store; he set them down and came forward. A stooped man with a sad pair of mustaches and a red, empty eye-socket, he came up behind the counter and looked a silent question at Ballinger with the other watery eye.

"Give me about a dozen cans of those sardines," Ballinger said. "And something else. Anything."

The old man threw a stack of greasy sardine cans on the counter. "How about some of them cheese? They're good to take on a trip where you don't want to stop and cook."

"All right," Ballinger answered in-

differently, eyeing the big yellow disk with a pie shaped wedge cut out of it.

"How many?" Jake asked, holding a long butcher knife over the cheese and looking up at Ballinger. "Uh. I said, how many?"

Ballinger didn't hear Jake, for he had turned to look at the man and woman who had come down the back stairs and were now seated at the table. The stairway led down toward the back of the store; a rack of saddles cut off the view of the front. So the man did not see Ballinger as he and the woman went to the table and sat down facing the rear window.

Ballinger was walking away from Jake who stood with his knife poised over the cheese. He was headed toward the table.

THE WOMAN looked up at him over the cup of coffee held to her lips, her dissipated face crowned with a disarray of uncombed hair, bloodshot eyes still fuzzy with sleep, faded red dress rumpled. One of the camp followers who helped Kelton's men get rid of their money.

Mack Stitch jumped as though the shoulder were a hot branding iron.

He turned his head, and at the sight of Ballinger his unshaved face went hard. He ran his fingers through the remains of his thin grizzled hair; then one hand instinctively went down to his beltline where his gunbelt should have been, as though he hoped that he might find that he had not come down to breakfast without it after all.

"What do you want?" he demanded suspiciously, taking the offensive for what it was worth.

"An answer to a little question, Stitch. Where'll I find Byrd Kelton?"

Apparently relieved to learn that Ballinger might not intend to shoot him on the spot, Stitch answered with a short, coarse laugh. "How would I know?"

"I'd try to remember if I were you."

The woman, experienced as she was in showing a complete lack of interest in the private business of her men friends, went on about her breakfast. She squirted catsup on her steak and gave her full attention to putting the top back on the bottle.

Stitch said to Ballinger, "You're off your range around here, mister. You'd better get moving before the rest of the boys come downstairs."

"I'm gambling that you don't have the boys trailing you when you go courting," Ballinger said. "Now answer my question."

"Get out," Stitch snapped.

Ballinger's hand swept up the catsup bottle, and the force of the blow shattered it against Stitch's bald forehead. Stitch's body jolted against the chair back. He closed his eyes, shook his head, then wiped the shards of glass and catsup out of his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

Ballinger yanked the table out from between the pair and sent it sliding over against the rear wall. "Get out of the way, woman," he ordered.

The bleary-eyed woman scuffled back to a corner and sat down on a burlap covered coil of lariat rope clutching her coffee cup. She didn't seem any too much concerned about the whole thing.

"Now," Ballinger said, "You or Kelton, it makes no difference to me."

And he drove his fist into the nose of Mack Stitch with a blow that sounded like an axe on the forehead of a butcher calf.

Stitch went over backward in his chair, and it took the big man a long moment to entangle himself and get awkwardly to his feet. He snorted blood out of his crushed nose and let it drip down his chin.

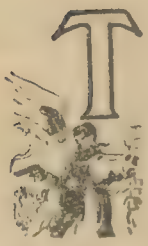
He got his feet square under himself, sniffed again, and then said in a voice that was lower than his usual bellow. "If you're going to use that gun you've got, you'd better do it now, because I'm going to kill you dead with my two hands."

The storekeeper came running along back of the counter, waving his butcher knife, his good eye wide with excitement. "Not in here, men.

Get outside; you've got the whole Jackforks to fight in. Get out."

Neither man heard him. The woman on the rope coil turned her incurious gaze on him a moment, then looked back to see Mack Stitch spring at Ballinger. She lifted her tin coffee cup to her lips.

5



THIS WAS more than a fight over Stitch's refusal to answer a question; it was the eternal feud between all men whose ways of living clash, and it was rooted deep in the very bones of them both. The antagonism between the mountain men and those who labored on the prairies for a living had always been a smouldering fire, waiting a breath—and breath of trouble—to fan it into a white flame.

Men who turn their backs on the ways of the working man hate him while they prey on him. In the deeper layers of their consciousness they are aware of the contempt in which they are held, and this awareness breeds a resentment which is easily exploded into hostility.

And men who wear away a little of their lives each day by the work of their hands can never view without emotion the trouble it takes to defend themselves and their goods from these predators.

Both men felt these things; both men knew without realizing it, that they were fighting over the graves of Johnny Woodford and Gus Lindstrom, and about the calves that were born in the valley to live a while then to melt into nothingness, like a morning fog.

Ballinger braced his feet against the oncoming Stitch, and he knew that something deep down within him was moving, something like a sleeping animal raising its head. He knew a kind of savage pleasure at the prospect of this fight; he felt the stirring of an atavistic urge which had been born in the sound of the crashing of his fist on the bone in Mack Stitch's face.

As Stitch came forward with lumbering speed, Ballinger moved his head aside and let Mack's fist pass over his shoulder, then whipped his own fist to Stitch's ear. The force of the blow knocked Stitch sideways; the big man landed against the wall, rolled around until his back was against it, then used it to catapult himself back at Ballinger.

He came in with his fists flying, and Ballinger could only parry the fury of them while he backed away. Stitch followed in, using his weight to bull his body forward, using his momentum to put force behind the big fists. Jim kept knocking the blows aside, getting in none of his own.

Stitch's fist crashed through his defense and fire exploded in Ballinger's head; he reeled backward, tripped over a nailkeg of double-bitt axe handles, and crashed to the floor.

Stitch made a triumphant noise in in his throat and rushed at him. The sharp points of his boot toes stabbed Ballinger's ribs, shooting pains all through his body. Stitch would kick him to death before he could get up.

Jim rolled over sideways, hit the table legs with his body, and kept rolling until he had passed under and to the other side of the table. Then while Stitch circled the table to get him. Jim got to his feet. When Stitch reached him, Ballinger ducked his head and came forward working both arms toward the big man's chin.

He felt the good feel of his blows connecting, kept them trained on the same spot on Stitch, while the savage feeling of a hot anger burned away the deadness in him, bringing him alive, rushing the blood through him with a kind of animal elation. He could go in for the kill now.

He crowded Stitch, coming in closer while the man's swinging fists were sliding off his own shoulders in ineffective punches.

But he should not have crowded a man as big as Stitch. The man was like a bull, all muscle and bone. He

seemed to have little sensitivity to pain; his sheath of muscle was a rawhide armor.

Ballinger saw his error as the massive arms of the man encircled him and the hands locked together behind his back. Stitch had him in a grip that could not be broken, his own arms imprisoned by his sides.

BALLINGER forced himself backward, trying to break out of the hold; but Stitch held on, tightening his pressure on Ballinger's ribs, and tightening it still again.

The air escaped from Ballinger's throat; his lungs were suddenly deflated under the pressure of the tightening steel band around his ribs. He could not breathe; he made jerking efforts to suck air into his lungs and it did no good. He could feel his face swelling, could feel the cords growing tight in his neck. Stitch had him helpless and strangling for lack of air.

Ballinger realized that he was fast using up his own strength in trying to escape from Stitch's hold. Trying to pull away backward, he could make no progress, for the big man had his feet firmly anchored on the floor and not all of Ballinger's strength could budge him.

Time was running out for Ballinger; in a few moments Stitch would have squeezed all the fight out of him. It was a hell of a way to finish a fight he had started.

He lifted one foot and crashed his boot heel down on the soft leather of Stitch's instep. He lifted his foot and stamped down again and again, the heavy heel of his boot twisting into the soft bones atop Stitch's foot. He put more weight into his pounding. He lifted himself onto his other toe, then came down with all his weight centered in the heel of the boot crunching Stitch's foot, drilling the boot heel into Stitch's instep with a twisting motion.

That did it! Stitch could not take any more of that; he lifted his foot to get it out of reach. And as Stitch's foot came up, leaving him balanced on the other, Ballinger threw all his weight forward against the man.

Out of balance, Stitch went over backward. The back of his head cracked on the leg of the saddle rack. His hold loosened slightly, but like a dying turtle, he held on. Still imprisoned, but face down on the supine Stitch, Ballinger brought his leg up and caught Stitch sharply in the groin with his knee. And then again. That brought a roar of agony out of the big man and drained all the strength out of his muscles.

Free for a moment, Ballinger rolled over and pulled himself upward with the aid of the glass candy counter, standing with his back to it while he sucked the welcome air into his lungs.

Blinded by his own pain, Stitch rolled over to his hands and knees under the saddle rack. As he got to his feet, he came up under it, like a man trying to stand up under a table. The rack spilled its three yellow saddles to the floor.

Stitch stood blinking in the stuper of pain, like a bull goaded out of his mind by a picador. His eyes did not touch Ballinger until they had vacantly swept the whole room. He looked at Ballinger as though he did not quite recognize him nor know what this business was all about; then the expression on his face slowly changed as his mind cleared.

He stooped over and picked up one of the saddles by its horn and cantle. Lifting it high over his head, he threw it straight at Ballinger.

The forty pounds of leather and metal flew the short distance separating the men, steel stirrups and cinch strap crashing into Ballinger in a flying tangle that sent him to the floor again amid the spilled axe handles. Ballinger took some moments to get out of the entangling mass.

Stitch had stepped over to the table containing the breakfast. He picked the table up by one leg, dumping tin plates and the coffee pot to the floor. He lifted the table and crashed it against the heavy overturned saddle rack. The table splintered, leaving in his hand the heavy two-by-two leg with a jagged piece of the top wood adhering to it.

He held his club up before his eyes, examining it, his face taking on a look of satisfaction. Then he turned to Ballinger who had not got up, seizing the moment to regain his breath.

"Now, friend," Stitch said. "We've quit playing."

As Stitch approached, Ballinger came to his feet. He had a shiney new axe handle in his hand, hefting it like a club, trying out its weight. It was a light piece of hickory with some spring in it. A blow from the overturned saddle rack. The table heavier chair leg Stitch was holding could snap it like a match stem.

STITCH WAS coming in to finish Ballinger off. Holding the square scantling with both hands, he swung it back over his shoulder like a bat. It came forward in a heavy swing at Ballinger's head.

The lighter Ballinger used his axe handle to fend off the blow as he stepped aside. Then, while the weight of Stich's heavy club carried it on down against the floor, Ballinger spun the axe handle around his head twice in a complete circle to give it momentum, then struck.

The sharp edge of the hickory cut across Stitch's right arm with the speed of a sabre. The bone in Stitch's arm cracked with an audible sound. His chair leg slid from his useless hand and thumped on the floor. The blow knocked a grunt out of Stitch.

The shock of the impact deadened any pain Stitch might have felt in his arm. He looked at his club on the floor and stooped to pick it up. That was when he saw that his hand wouldn't work. He stood up and stared at it stupidly, apparently trying to make the muscles work. Then he lifted the hand with the other one, gazing at it curiously. It was as though he were lifting some foreign object. When he turned it loose, it fell to his side, lifeless. "Don't matter," he growled at Ballinger. "One's enough to kill you with."

The implacable light of hatred in his eyes was turned full on Ballinger now as Stitch advanced toward him again. He was like some animal whose urge to fight to the death is not a matter of his own will, but an instinct over which he has no control. Stitch knew no retreat, knew no surrender.

His mouth was open and bloody saliva dripped down his chin. His face was a crisscross of bloody splotches and streaks, his eyes those of a beast. He came toward Ballinger, as a crazed man might walk unknowingly into a fire.

Ballinger saw that there was to be no end of this while the man was conscious. He whirled the axe handle again over his head, spinning it to flying speed, and whipped it at Stitch's head. The impact made a sickening thud. Stitch stood in a daze, his tongue hanging out, the lower half of his ear hanging by a shred. The blood ran down the open neck of his shirt. He rocked, but the uncanny brute instinct in him somehow kept him standing stupidly on his feet.

Ballinger threw away his axe handle.

"Now we're about matched," he said. "And this is for Gus Lindstrom. Do you know Gus? He was a good man, Stitch; a friend of mine."

Stitch did not hear him, but that made no difference. Ballinger did not know that he was talking.

JIM WADED into Stitch now, still talking about Lindstrom, returning to his attack. Stitch tried to raise his right arm to guard his

face, and it wouldn't come up. He lifted his left and Ballinger knocked it down.

Stitch was out on his feet, but he could not be put down. Now the force of Ballinger's blows kept driving him backward, and Ballinger followed them in.

Life was flowing back into Ballinger faster now; he was dredging up a renewed energy out of the depths of himself, from some secret untapped springs that he did not know he had.

He drove Stitch back against the old woodbox beside the rusty stove. Stitch went over backward. The big man rolled over and tried to get onto his hands and knees. His right arm wouldn't hold his weight, and he waddled on his knees and his left hand like a crippled bear.

Ballinger followed him along until he had crawled to the candy counter and dragged himself up. Then Ballinger took a deep breath, took his time, and swung a long looping blow crashing squarely onto the point of Stitch's chin.

The pain of bone on bone sent a streak of agony up Ballinger's arm and clear into his back. But it was a good kind of pain. As he saw Stitch go over backward, crashing through the thin glass of the candy showcase, some heavy dark thing seemed to leave its abode in the depths of Ballinger's spirit and fly away, leaving him a clean man again.

Stitch lay enshrouded in a mixed assortment of striped peppermint sticks and sparkling red and green gumdrops. His eyes were open, but they were not seeing anything, they were unfocused.

Ballinger stood over the unconscious man until he was convinced that there was no more fight in him. His hand went instinctively to the gun that had stayed in its holster throughout the battle, and the heel of it rested on the pistol butt. The Jackforks would be a better place to live in if he lifted that gun and sent a well-deserved bullet through that bloody head now.

But he could not lift the gun. He spat and turned away, walking up to the counter where he had laid his sardines. Jake lifted his butcher knife over the big yellow disk of cheese, and the good eye in his blank face was without expression as he looked at Ballinger.

"How many of them cheese did you say?"

6

BALLINGER took his groceries in a paper bag and threw two silver dollars on the counter.

"Who's going to pay the damages?" Jake asked, looking at the wreckage of his store.

"Everything goes on Kelton's account," Ballinger answered; "bill him for it."

He turned toward the rear of the store with his paper bag.

"Front way out," Jake said.

"I've got business back there," Ballinger said, and kept going.

As he reached the rear of the store, the woman with the dead eyes was still holding her tin coffee cup in her two hands. A spark of interest crept into her face as he came near the door.

"I'm Agnes," she said in a weary voice. "I live down the road, if you're going to be around." A touch of pride made a try for expression in her face as she added, "The house with the petunia bed in front. They're blooming now. Pretty."

As he went out the door, the woman's body sagged a little more wearily, and she lifted the tin coffee cup to her lips again with both hands.

Ballinger waded through rusty tin cans and other rubbish back of the building, passed a rank smelling outhouse and found what he wanted. Stitch's horse was in a pole corral, his saddle hanging by a tie strap in the shed.

Ballinger roped the animal and led him out and around the store and into the woods across the street. He

had no intention of letting Stitch or anybody else ride out to warn Kelton that he was looking for him.

Catching his own horse, Jim started following the thin double tracks of the old logging road leading still high into the peaks of the mountains. He moved fast, transferring his saddle alternately from his own horse to the other animal every hour or so to keep from wearing out his horse. He might need a fresh mount before he got out again.

Ballinger was getting into country up here which was less familiar to him than the lower reaches of the ridge; he rode more carefully, alert to every sign of fresh tracks in the road, cautiously moving around the sharp turns of the track, stopping to listen and to search out the ground ahead of him. The pines made a solid canopy over his head. Somewhere up here were the secret things surrounding Kelton and his men. The higher Jim went, the deeper into Kelton's territory he was penetrating, and greater was the risk of a bullet from behind any of the big pines.

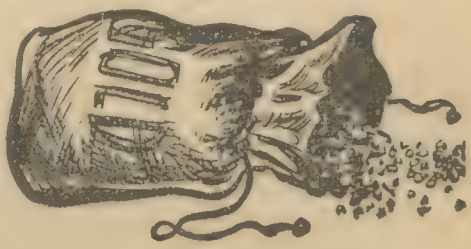
The next day wore on slowly under the tense alertness with which he rode. The soreness and bone weariness which his fight had left in him was beginning to tell on him; he had eaten some of his cheese but had not stopped to open any of the cans of sardines.

Now, in mid-afternoon, his strength ran out and he had to have rest. When he came to the next brook crossing the trail, Ballinger pulled off into the woods and followed the small stream to its source in a spring pouring out from between two rocks in a sharp cliff.

AFTER HE had watered his horses and hidden them behind a clump of brush, he sat down beside the spring and made his meal out of a can of sardines and cold spring water. Ballinger rolled a cigarette and was twisting the end of it when his hands stopped dead still. He sat as rigid and motionless as though he had suddenly been turned to stone.

He did not know what it was that sent the warning through him—possibly a sound too small for him to have heard, consciously. But he felt that he was being watched.

Jim dropped the cigarette from his hand and had his gun out, while he explored his surroundings with his eyes and ears. He could hear the movement of his horses behind the clump of brush. He saw a horned frog run up on a rock and look at him, turning his little dinosaur head to right and left. A sand wasp lit in the wet clay at the side of the spring, its metallic blue wings vibrating alertly as he captured a tiny water spider. A small, green-striped grass snake showed its head around a clump of bunch grass, testing the air for danger with its sensitive tongue.



The seconds were long in passing, having no beginning and no end, and the tightness built up in Ballinger until the knuckles on the hand holding the gun were white with strain.

Then a low voice, coming from somewhere behind Ballinger, broke the tension. "All right, Jim. This is Shorty."

Ballinger recognized the voice, and he let the long-held air out of his lungs. His muscles went limp with the reaction of the letdown. "All right, Shorty. Come on."

Then he looked around and saw where the voice had come from. The silhouette of Shorty's wide-eared head hung over the edge of the cliff a dozen feet above him.

There was a scuffling of rock as Shorty's head disappeared, and a few moments later he came through the brush and emerged at the spring. "For Gawd's sake, give me a cigarette!" he said.

Not another word was spoken until they both had smokes going. Ballinger waited for the other to start talking, which he would not do until he was ready, and then in his own way.

Finally Shorty gave Ballinger a close look and made a comment. "I was in a county jail once," he said in a casual tone. "And I learned something; you can learn things in jail sometimes."

"Like what?"

"They had a new invention there called a rock hammer. Used it to break the rocks with. A lot easier than breaking them with your face."

"Oh, that," Ballinger answered with equal casualness. "The women around here always claimed I was the prettiest man in the Jackforks. Men were jealous of me; I reckon Mack Stitch had that in mind when I tangled with him this morning."

"You won't be bothered with women saying that, for a while, anyway." Shorty offered judiciously. "I couldn't even recognize you. You looked so ornery I almost shot you just on general principles; don't like mean-looking strangers around my spring."

"You homesteaded here?"

"Practically proved up on the place. I settled here yesterday morning; been waiting for somebody to come by with a horse and something I could eat."

"There's some cheese and sardines rolled up in my slicker on my saddle," Ballinger said.

"No, there ain't," Shorty said. "I'd already stole them five minutes after you left your horse."

"You fixing to settle here for the winter?"

"No," Shorty answered. "Fact is, I ain't over-fond of this particular spot. I only planned to stay till somebody came along with a horse. I thought my luck was in when I found that grub and that extra horse. I was going to kill you and get going; how'd you know I lost my horse?"

"I figured the chances were you'd always be falling off your horse and he'd go off and leave you, so I just brought along a spare. Correct me if I'm wrong."

SHORTY rolled another cigarette out of Ballinger's bag. "Well, I didn't fall off, exactly; I just abandoned him. Never could cover much territory on a dead horse, anyway."

"Most people don't even bother to try to ride them," Ballinger observed. "Not on these steep trails, anyway. A waste of time."

"He wasn't dead when I got on him. Somehow I'd neglected to bullet-proof him, so when Kelton's bullets hit him, he just lay down and died. Damned poor shots, those guys—couldn't hit a man on horseback."

"Maybe Kelton wasn't really mad at you."

"No, I reckon he wasn't—at first. He was just mad at you."

"And he took it out on you?"

"Why shouldn't he? Anybody ties up with you ought to be shot. I'd done talked Kelton into giving me a job, and was getting along all right with him until along comes one of his men that had been in town the other day when the ruckus was going on at the courthouse. It seems that this hombre saw me talking to you right chummy. So when he sees me in Kelton's bunkhouse, he somehow got the idea that maybe I was playing two ends against the middle. Shows you how much trouble a suspicious-minded man can make, don't it?"

"I'd have thought Kelton would have parted your hair for you right there."

"I reckon he would have, except, I was lucky; I got friends everywhere. You see, this Kelton has got a younger brother that's just come in to join the fun. He brought a half a dozen gun-rannies with him to help in the battle that's coming up, and it happened that one of them was an hombre I knew name of Red Mason. Red's an all right guy and a friend of mine. He just drifted up here on account of some misunderstanding he had with the husband of some girl friend of his, some-

where. Seems the husband wasn't near as fast a shot as he thought he was.

"Anyhow, Red heard this hombre spill his guts about me and you—so he tips me off that maybe I'd worked for Kelton long enough. I resigned as of then, and lit a shuck out of there, about five minutes ahead of the firing squad. It just proved again that no good ever came of me knowing a man like you."

"And that made him mad at you?"

"No; he got mad at me when I found where the calves was hid."

"Well, well," Ballinger said dryly. "I sent you up here to look for those calves. If you're sure you're through telling me your life story, maybe you'll tell me where they are?"

"Sure, but hold on a minute. I was afraid to shoot a rabbit, so I'm hungry; wait till I get them sardines."

Shorty got up, and Jim had to content himself with waiting until he came back with the slicker, took his time unrolling it, opened a can of sardines with his knife and began eating.

"Well, like I say," Shorty finally continued. "While I was leading the army Kelton's going after you with, I bumped into the damnedest thing you ever saw. I haven't figured it out yet. Just what would you say would be a good calf crop in terms of percentages?"

"About sixty-five percent, maybe. Two out of every three cows should bring calves in a good year. You studying bookkeeping?"

"That's what I thought. Well, I'll show you a bunch of shorthorns with a hundred percent calf crop, most of 'em twins. And there's not a bull in the herd! And for another thing, all these old red shorthorns have got good whiteface calves; and all the calves are about the same age. Now ain't that a miracle of animal husbandry?"

"It is for a fact," Ballinger said, hiding his impatience. "I don't want to pry into your affairs, but if you're burdened with any more confessions that you'd like to share with me, I'll try to carry the weight."

"All right," Shorty answered in a hurt voice, "I'm trying to tell you everything just as straight and to the point as I can. When Kelton gets offended at me, he and his men is trying to run me down with intent to do bodily harm. I run into this big high valley with that magic herd while I was trying to get away from them. They got me hemmed up in a box canyon over there a piece, and that's when they shot my horse. I managed to kill a couple of his men, anyhow, before they set me afoot. But I'd reckon Kelton realized I'd seen too much for a friend of yours to see; they've been combing these woods for me ever since, and I haven't had a chance to rest. They was keeping me on the move, and while I was trying to keep out of the way, I run into another magic valley. There's a bunch of larger white-faced calves growing there that not only ain't got no daddies like the others, but they ain't got no mamas either. The fairies must have brought 'em, or something. This is a wonderful place for a cowman."

"Damn it," Jim said, "if you found those things yesterday, why the hell didn't you come on down and let us know?"

"What? Me walk all the way down the mountain? What do you think I am, one of them mountain goats? I was waiting here for somebody to come along with a horse I could borrow. Shows I was right; you brought me one. It's just that simple when you use your head, ain't it?"

BALLINGER answered dryly, "You should have let me know. I'd have brought you a buggy. Come on then, you ride that horse of Stitch's; we'll go get your saddle off your dead horse, then you can take me and show me these magic herds. I'd like to see them before dark."

"Any time," Shorty grinned at him. "I'll put my saddle on that animal in case we have to move out in a hurry. You want to wait here?"

"Where is your saddle?"

"Right over there behind a rock."

"You mean you ran all over these

mountains lugging your saddle?"

"I did not, Shorty answered, his faded blue eyes wide; "they killed the horse right over the other side of this ridge."

"So they didn't really chase you afoot?"

"Sure they did. But a wise rabbit hides under the hunter's whiskers. I circled around, just like a cottontail when you jump him close to his nest, and came right back here. And I haven't heard a sound of Kelton's men since I ditched them over by the other valley."

"Then saddle up; I want to see those calves before dark."

"You won't have to wait that long; you're practically right on top of them right now."

"What do you mean?"

"That ledge is the outer wall of the bowl I've been trying to tell you about. They're grazing less'n a quarter of a mile from where you're sitting. But they won't be there when Kelton sets out to sweep you folks out of the valley, just for safety's sake."

"What's this about sweeping us out of the valley, or is the question out of turn?"

"I been trying to tell you all the time," Shorty complained, "but you're always interrupting. I got my job with Kelton because he was hiring all the gunhands he could get. He says the valley ranchers have been giving him too much trouble lately, and he's going to take about fifty men and wipe out every rancher on the flats. They don't reckon to leave a building standing down there, nor a man alive. They're going to take over the county seat, put their own men in office, and rule this whole neck of the woods. I was trying to tell you that all the time. Come on, if you want to see those cattle."

SHORTY found his hidden saddle and put it on Stitch's horse; Ballinger followed him horseback through a winding trail leading over the rim of the valley. Jim was lost in thought for a long time, then he asked Shorty another question. "Did you learn when they intended to start their war?"

"Sure. In about a week, First, they plan to take a bunch into town and free that prisoner you folks were fighting about the other day. They plan that, during the fracas, they will kill the sheriff and anybody else that's got guts enough to stand up against 'em. They want to do that first so there won't be any organized resistance in town when they start knocking off the ranches. Then, they're waiting for more men; they intend to do the job right when they start."

"Shorty," Ballinger said as the horses stopped on the top of the rise, "you've learned more in a couple of days than we've learned in a year. That's the most important information we've ever been able to get our hands on. Every one of us could have been wiped out."

"Oh, that," Shorty said. "I wasn't thinking about that. What's important to me is the real puzzle of this business. That bunch of weaned calves would average maybe three months older than the bunch that is nursing them shorthorns. Taking it that both bunches of calves was stole from you people in the valley, where's the calves that must have been born to them mothers to freshen them in the first place? There's probably two hundred of them cows and every one of them fresh. How could Kelton get a hundred percent calf crop to freshen all them cows even if he had bulls around, and where are the calves that actually should be nursing those cows? Now, that's a puzzle of the first magnitude, for my money."

Ballinger did not answer. He had stopped his horse atop the ridge and was gazing down into a grassy bowl of about a hundred acres. It

was smooth-floored and its green carpet sloped gently down to the center from all sides, suggesting that it was the bed of some lake which had long since dried up.

He felt his nerves tingling from his head down into his boots as he saw the big herd of red shorthorns with their red-and-white splotched Hereford calves at their sides. These, he knew beyond question, were part of the calves that he and his neighbors had been missing for more than a year.

"Pretty, ain't they?" Shorty asked. "But the thing that sicks in my mind is —"

"Yes, I know," Ballinger answered absently. "Did you notice if those calves were branded yet?"

"Yeah. All got Kelton's Circle K on 'em. But what worries me is —"

"Let's go," Ballinger said. "This is all we need to tie this whole business onto Kelton."

7

BALLINGER set his horse moving down the gentle slope of the pasture, headed toward the nearest cow and calf. Shorty was trying to tell him something, but his mind was so absorbed in this discovery that he did not hear him. By the time he had reached the cow, he had his lariat off his saddle horn. In another two minutes he had roped and thrown the calf, and was out of his saddle. "Keep that cow away from me a minute," he shouted to Shorty.

The calf lay bawling on its side with Kelton's brand hardly healed on its hip. On his knees beside the calf, Ballinger fished out his stock knife and opened the razor-sharp castrating blade, while Shorty, on horseback above him, kept the mother cow back.

Ballinger's excitement showed in the nervousness of his hands as he pinched up the skin of the calf's chest at the point protected by the calf's left front leg. Now he had slit the loose skin of the calf's chest, and explored the cavity with a finger. When he got up off his knees he was holding a small bloody object which he wiped clean on the seat of his levis, and then held out to Shorty.

"What would you say that was?" he asked.

"A dime," Shorty answered, his face puzzled. "Why?"

"What's on the back side of it?"

Shorty flipped the dime over in his hand. "Why— Say, the printing has been filed clean off of it. It's got some initials stamped on it. Looks like it was done with one of them little letter punches."

"That's exactly what it is. Troy Laney's brand. The day that calf was born in his herd, Laney made a little slit in the skin of its chest under its leg and put that dime in there under the skin. It healed over in a few days. We all carry those dimes with our brands on them. We've been doing that for six months now. But this is the first time we've ever found one of the missing calves we've marked that way. Our brands under the skin; Kelton's brand on the outside of the skin. Shorty, we've got Bryd Kelton nailed to the cross now."

Shorty scratched one of his batwing ears, and his guileless blue eyes blinked. "Now if that ain't something. I've heard of kids putting dimes in china piggy banks, but full grown men putting dimes in real live calfy banks—"

Ballinger said, "Now we've got his hide nailed to the barn door for sure."

Shorty looked hurt. "Piggy banks —calfy banks—"

"We'll get organized and come up here and —"

Shorty gave up. "Yeah, you could have, he agreed. "But I been trying to tell you all along. Kelton was intending to start moving them weaners to-day."

"Let 'em move 'em. We'll get 'em wherever they are."

"But what I mean, they have to come through this pasture to get to the other one."

"Let 'em come. We'll get back down to the flats to pick up some help."

"That's what I mean," Shorty said; "It's too late to do that. There's Kel-

ton's bunch coming now. Reckon they don't want us trespassing."

Jim saw the approaching horsemen bearing down on them from a distance of three or four hundred yards. Kelton's men were spread out fanwise, drawing rifles from saddle boots.

BALLINGER sprang for his horse. As he threw himself into the saddle, he heard the whine of a rifle bullet by his head and the roar of the gun. Shorty was throwing the spurs to his horse and shouting over his shoulder.

There were more rifles in action now, and a series of blasts sent a swarm of whining bullets around them. Ballinger looked over his shoulder and saw the entire party of Kelton's men in a dead run toward them.

Ahead of them, less than a quarter of a mile, the rim of the bowl rose in a steep incline of jagged stones and boulders. Shorty was flogging his animal with the ends of his bridle reins and veering to the left, with Ballinger fifty feet behind him. The roar of Kelton's artillery was a steady thunder now.

Suddenly Shorty's horse jumped out of his stride. His front legs buckled as he landed, and his body somersaulted over his head. Shorty sailed over the animal's neck and slid to a stop face down on the ground. The horse's legs threshed violently, the animal let out a long screech, shivered once, and was still.

Ballinger was bringing his mount to a sliding stop as he reached Shorty. The little man was up on hands and knees now, feeling for his pistol in his holster. "There it is" Jim shouted, pointing to the gun which had flown out of its pouch and lay by a tuft of sawgrass. "Hurry."

Squatty sprinted toward the weapon, pouched it and raced back toward Ballinger's horse. Jim gave him a hand up, and he landed astride Ballinger's saddle behind the cantle as Ballinger spurred the horse into motion again. A storm of bullets whined around them.

"That man sure likes to see me afoot," Shorty complained. "Over to the left a little more; that deertrail we came down."

With its double load, the horse picked his way gingerly and slowly upward through the rocks. Shorty, riding behind Ballinger, turned and threw a shot back at their pursuers. "Save your shells," Ballinger cautioned him; "you can't hit anything from horseback."

"Kelton done a good job on my horse," Shorty complained.

"Accident. Save your ammunition; we're a long way from out of this."

Jim forced the horse to the left, picked up the deertrail, and they worked their way up the rise through the field of boulders, completely exposed to the bullets that sang around them. In his eagerness to overtake them, Kelton had not thought to halt his men and shoot from more steady positions. That was all that saved Ballinger and Shorty.

THEY REACHED the top of the ridge and the safety of a big boulder. Shorty slid to the ground. "There's a clump of elders on past the spring," he said. "The horse will be as safe there as any place; I'll slow Kelton down."

Ballinger kept on down the far side of the ridge and tied the horse in the elders, then came and rejoined Shorty, who squatted a big rock while he watched the approaching horsemen. "Not in pistol range yet," Shorty observed. "And they're saving their shells."

Kelton's party still rode forward headlong, evidently under the impression that Ballinger and Shorty would keep going, depending on the woods to give them shelter. But Jim and Shorty had both decided against trying to run for it, even without consulting each other. The horse could not carry double and have the speed necessary to outdistance the Kelton men; they would have been tracked down and overtaken within a short time.

Ballinger dropped beside Shorty, looking out over the bowl from between the sides of two boulders jammed together. "I want Kelton for myself," he said; "I've got a bill against him."

"That one with the yellow shirt riding with him," Shorty said; "that's his brother."

"All of them look alike to me," Ballinger answered dryly.

This field of rocks on the highest point of the ridge was bare of brush or trees; the sun beat down hot on them, reflecting back from the heated rocks. Jim was stretched out on the hot ground, watching the approaching figures from between the rock cleft.

Ballinger's two cartridge belts were filled, but he reached into his pocket and brought out another box of shells. "How are you fixed for ammunition?" he asked. Shorty was wearing only one gun, and his belt was not filled.

"Plenty of it," Shorty grinned back at him. "Down there in my saddlebags."

"That's fine," Ballinger answered. "Yell for Kelton to bring it to you while he's coming." He tossed his extra box of shells to Shorty. "Take care of those; it's a long walk through the rain to your horse."

Shorty asked, "What rain?"

"It's raining lead out there, ain't it?"

Shorty opened the box and dumped the shells into his hat which he lay upturned beside him. He squinted up at the sun. "Four hours till dark," he opined.

"We can hold them off that long." Ballinger said; "they can't get higher than we are, and we've got protection all around."

Kelton apparently knew the deer-trail up the side of the bowl, and he veered his horsemen toward it. The sound of their hooves was audible now as the men started up the incline with their rifles lying across their saddle horns.

"Damned fool thing for Kelton to forget that we might be waiting," Shorty snorted. "Well, they've come far enough, to my mind." He raised his pistol, balancing it on his protective rock, then elevated his head, sighting down the barrel; Shorty grimaced as he pulled the trigger.

The man in the yellow shirt, riding beside Kelton, suddenly dived sideways out of his saddle and landed on a rock. His body rolled out of sight behind it. His horse, riderless, whirled and picked his way back downward.

Ballinger dropped his gun into the cleft of his rocks an lined up on Kelton. As he squeezed the trigger, Kelton yanked his horse up short. The horse reared and caught the bullet meant for its rider; Kelton went down, landing on his feet and dodging behind a boulder.

THE OTHER riders yanked their horses to a stop, and the dozen of them were off their horses in miraculous time. The boulder field swallowed them up. Rifle barrels popped out above stones; faces showed long enough to trigger a rifle and then disappeared. The roar of guns lifted and swept off toward hillsides where it bounced back and forth in diminishing echoes. Smoke rose lazily and melted in the hot afternoon. And bullets glanced and whined around Ballinger and Shorty.

"I think I was wrong when I took this job," Shorty said. "I'll be wanting double wages for this work; I told you I didn't work afoot."

"You keep your mind on those rocks," Ballinger replied. "You're

sitting down to your work and that's what you like."

Kelton's riderless horses had turned and picked their way downhill through the stones, and now had gathered on the flat sod below. "I could use one of them animals," Shorty said, and fired at a head that popped up over a stone.

"The Cavalry couldn't even keep you in horses," Jim answered. "A man has to look after his mount, or learn to go afoot."

"Oh," Shorty said, widening his eyes. "That's the secret of being a cowboy, is it?"

A bullet chipped stone in his face, and whined away like an angry hornet. "Damn you," he shouted, and threw a bullet at a head that had emerged above a boulder.

The man who had exposed himself stood up like a jack in the box. His arms spread out; the rifle dropped from his hand; he fell backward, bounced off one rock and landed on his back on a flat stone where he lay in full sight of Ballinger and Shorty.

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Shorty looked around for another target. "This is going to get dull before dark," he complained; "do you happen to have a set of checkers with you?"

Ballinger had been studying the hillside before him, and he did not turn his head as he answered. "You're wrong about that. It's never dull when Kelton is thinking up moves; see there?"

Four men had managed to back down the hill in the concealment of the boulder field and now, out of reach of Ballinger's pistols, they stood up and ran for the horses who were grouped out on the grass. Shorty cursed them and threw a futile shot in their direction. "That's four we scared off," he opined. "Seven or eight to go."

"That's four we didn't scare off," Jim said. "Kelton has thought of something."

"Like what?"

"Well—look! Two more!" They had to lie behind their rocks and watch six of Kelton's men mount and ride away to the east.

Shorty said, "They're going to circle us."

"Kelton knows these trails better than we do; he'll have those men cutting us off from getting out of here after dark."

Then Jim saw something that he could not understand at all. Kelton himself appeared at the foot of the hill, having worked his way back downhill without exposing himself. He went and got his horse, but he did not ride away. He took up a position near the foot of the hill and waited.

"What I wouldn't give for a rifle," Shorty said. "He's just taunting us, standing there like that."

"He doesn't do things just to taunt people; he's got something in mind."

8

BALLINGER and Shorty watched Kelton ride back and forth along the foot of the ridge in movements which seemed meaningless to them.

"He must be waiting for those men to come around behind us," Shorty guessed.

"It's a feint of some kind," Jim agreed; "he knows we're going to keep our eyes on him."

"Ain't he got sense enough to know that we could figure those others would come up behind us?"

Shorty had moved the dozen or so feet across the flat top of the ridge so that he could look down to the other side; that was the side facing the spring, from which Shorty had looked down on Ballinger at the time of his arrival.

Jim turned to look at Shorty in his new position, and as his head turned, he caught sight of a moving shape out of the corner of his eye. A bare head of red hair suddenly arose from behind a rock within two feet of him; two baleful green eyes regarded him, while an elbow and

hand hooked over the lip of the rock held the man in view as he raised his pistol.

Ballinger swung his own gun around until the muzzle was in the man's face, and triggered. The face disappeared, and the man's falling body took gravel and stones down with it as it rolled out of sight. Shorty whirled from his position and came scuffling back on hands and knees. Jim held his position with his gun poised against the possibility of a second man having been beside the redhead.

The second man came from another direction. Ballinger was on his knees at the lip of the rock, and the second man stuck an arm over and grabbed his ankle, giving him a jerk. Out of balance, Ballinger's one leg went over the edge of the rock, and he would have gone on over except for Shorty's quick work. The little man was in sitting position; quickly, he thrust out his legs in time for Jim to grasp one of his boots.

Only the arm of the Kelton man was showing. Shorty, sitting flat with Ballinger grasping his ankle, lifted his gun. His bullet blasted the elbow of the Kelton man, tearing the other's grip loose from Ballinger's leg, and sending the man tumbling down the rocky precipice after his dead comrade.

Ballinger wriggled himself back over his rock, and sat down. Shorty dusted off his boot with his hand and grinned at him. "Wipe your hands the next time you grab my boot, will you? You spoiled the polish."

Jim was watching the rock field all around their pinnacle. "There are four more men hidden down there," he said, "and a half a dozen coming up back of us. You might get polished off, right, before we get out of here."

Shorty squinted up at the sky. "Wonder what's keeping the sun standing still?" he asked. "It ain't moved since we been up here—eight or ten hours."

"We've been here maybe one hour," Ballinger answered. "What I'm trying to figure is how to get out of here as soon as it gets dark. They'll have the trail blocked, and the only other way down is that steep rocky side of the mountain that runs down to the prairie. I never heard of a horse ever making his way down that grade."

BALLINGER crossed the summit on which they were trapped and looked off to the east. The rocky hillside fell away sharply on the other side of the spring for a distance of several hundred feet. There it dropped into a narrow valley which ran almost parallel to the ridge but with a slight downward pitch.

"If we could get down that grade all right," he said to Shorty, "we might be able to follow that valley downward to the open country. It doesn't look as though we can head straight down from here. The horse couldn't make it."

"We've still got the little job of staying alive till dark," Shorty reminded him cheerfully. "Then we can worry about getting down."

"You're wrong," Jim said, "we're not going to wait till dark."

Shorty stared at him. "Are you crazy?"

"No, but I'm gambling that Kelton figures we're going to wait till dark and then get out along the trail. So, those men that rode away are going to be hiding along that trail waiting for us, we're not going to accommodate them."

"What are you going to do? Just turn loose and roll down to the foot of the mountain?"

"No. We're going to get on our horses and ride down that grade or fall down it. Right now. Let's go."

Shorty said seriously, "We've got just as much chance riding down the side wall of a barn."

"Come on," Ballinger snapped, "I'm not waiting here for them to surround us in the dark. Reload your gun."

"All right then," Shorty responded, ejecting his spent shells and reloading his weapon. He emptied the rest of the shells out of his hat and put it on his head. "What are you waiting for?"

Ballinger backed away from his rock after taking one last look at Kelton, who still rode back and forth in an apparently aimless manner down in the flat part of the bowl, but keeping safely out of the range of a pistol shot. "Whatever we meet on the hillside," he told Shorty, "Kelton won't be with them to give his orders, he can't make it over the ridge before we're on our way."

"Or finished," Shorty opined. "Now if there was snow on the mountain, we could maybe slide down."

"You may slide down anyway," Ballinger said as he got to his feet, protected from Kelton's sight by the

lip of the ridge.

They made their way to the elders by the spring, where the horse was tied, and brought the animal out to the trail, where they both mounted. Ballinger pushed the horse across the trail and into the trees, when Shorty said, "Wait a minute."

Shorty slid off the horse, ripped a switch off a bush and went back and dusted the hoofprints out of the dirt, then piled back on the horse again. Jim set the animal down the steep slope. Here trees grew out of a field of rocks ranging in size from gravel to stones as big as a cabin; all were on a hillside so steep that every step the horse took sent small avalanches of gravel rolling, and brought a grunt from the animal in his efforts to keep himself in balance with his double load.

Ballinger had to guide the animal in a zig-zag course to enable it to hold its footing at all; still the horse grunted, fought for his equilibrium, and kicked up stones with a noise that must have carried for a great distance. "That noise ain't doing us any good," Shorty complained. "Can't you tell your animal to tiptoe quietly?"

A shot whistled by him from the rear, and the echo of the blast seemed to be right in their ears. Another shot followed, and after time enough for the first man to lever his weapon, still another.

Shorty twisted around, then shouted. "Two of 'em. They must have heard us and come a-running down the trail; get going."

Ballinger twisted his animal around a huge boulder, safe for a moment, but in an untenable position. The Kelton men searched them out with rifle fire, sending their bullets whining and bouncing all around them. "Here we go," Jim said, as he pushed the horse on with his spurs. "Nothing to do but dodge them."

SHORTY stitched the animal's flank with his spurs and kept looking over his shoulder. Ballinger lashed the horse's shoulders with the ends of his bridle reins, leaning forward over his neck and guiding him down the rocky slope, favoring every rock big enough for a moment's concealment.

They almost reached the point where the slope leveled off into the sharp ravine-bottomed valley between them and the next rise when his horse's foot hit a round rock. The animal stumbled down to his knees, and Ballinger went over his head, landing on his back on the ground.

Shorty slid off sideways and grabbed the horse's reins. The animal did not go all the way down, but pulled himself up again and tried to make a break for it. Shorty held him back while Jim was getting to his feet. The horse limped as he put his near front foot on the ground.

Back of them there was a yell and a new hail of lead from the Kelton men who had slid off their horses at the top of the grade and were now fighting their way down afoot, darting from boulder to boulder in their attack. A man could

make better time than a horse in this treacherous footing.

Ballinger's face was skinned where he hit the gravel floor, and the left sleeve of his shirt was split for its whole length. His gun had fallen from its holster; he stopped to pick it up when something hit him with an indescribable force and flung him back down against the rocks. There was no pain, but his whole left shoulder and arm just seemed to be non existent, to have no feeling in them except extreme shock.

Jim lay a moment, lacking the will to rise. Then Shorty threw a shot at a man darting between boulders above them, and rushed to Ballinger. "Bad?" he asked. He saw the crimson stain the back on Ballinger's shirt, high up on the left shoulder.

Jim tried to move his arm, and there was no movement in it. "Can't tell," he answered. "Give me a hand up, will you?"

Shorty got him to his feet, got him against the horse's side. "Can you get this foot in the saddle?"

Ballinger's feet were working; it was only the left arm and the left side of his body which seemed to have disappeared, leaving only a kind of shocked ghost of themselves.

Shorty took Ballinger's gun and stuffed it into its holster and Ballinger had his good hand free to grasp the saddle horn. Thus between the two, they got Ballinger aboard. Still there was no pain in him, but he was beginning to have a sick sensation.

"Can you hold on?" Shorty asked. He had shed his banter completely. "We'll be out of this in a minute." They pushed forward along the floor of the ravine separating the two ridges, and, passing into a group of trees, were for the time out of sight of their pursuers.

"I've got to hold on," Jim answered. "We've seen Kelton's hole card now, and there's only one way he can save his hide; he's got to kill us before we get a chance to pass the information on to the others."

"What if you pass out on me?" Shorty asked with concern. "What do I do next?"

"I can't afford to pass out, I tell you. But if I do, see if you can get me down to my own house, then get word to the first neighbor you can find. Head for Woodford's, the first place east of mine, and tell them what we found."

They made their way through the footing of the ravine which was getting more passable as they descended. After a while, Shorty asked, "How you feeling now? Beginning to hurt?"

Ballinger was swaying in the saddle, though he was clinging tightly to the horn with his good hand. "Yeah, it's hurting a little, but I can hold on."

There was deep concern in Shorty's next question. "Beginning to feel tired and weak, kinda like you didn't care much whether you made it or not?"

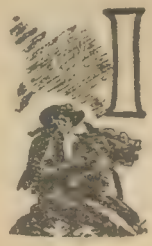
"Something like that," Jim admitted.

"I know. I've been shot up plenty. Just tell me when you feel like you can't hold on any more and I'll get you off and we'll stay and make a stand."

"Don't do that," Ballinger answered quickly. "You've got to get word to Woodford."

Shorty did not argue with him, but sat silently behind him on the horse, trying to give him support in the saddle with his own body. Thus they made their way down the mountainside.

9



IT WAS dusk when Shorty pulled the horse out of the timber of the mountainside and saw the flat prairie before him. Ballinger was swaying in the saddle now, as if he were drunk; an occasional, unintelligible word came from his lips.

"Just hold on, kid," Shorty said; "we're amost there."

He set the horse's head toward

the cluster of buildings in the distance, placed an arm around the waist of the wounded man in the saddle before him. Shorty was worried now, as it became evident that Ballinger's wound was taking more out of him than he had expected it would.

On a sudden impulse, he asked, "Where is this Woodford place?"

"East," Jim muttered; "about four miles."

Without consulting Ballinger, Shorty gradually turned the horse in a slow turn to the southeast, thus veering away from Ballinger's place, and finally striking the road that ran east and west past it. After a while he saw a light ahead, and finally pulled up at Woodford's with Ballinger hardly able to stay on the horse.

Shorty called to the lighted house, and suddenly the light was extinguished. He called again, and a suspicious voice answered, "Who is it?"

Nobody here would know his name, so Shorty answered, "Ballinger."

There was silence from the house, and Shorty kept waiting, his impatience rising. Ballinger's head was bowed over now until it almost touched the saddle horn. Shorty slid off the horse, still supporting him, and then ordered, "Come on, Jim. Turn loose and slide off; I've got you."

Ballinger turned loose the horn; when he slid out of the saddle, his body was like that of a dead man. He went limp; his knees buckled and he fell into the dirt.

Shorty turned him over on his back, got the horse away from him, then got down on his knees over him, talking encouragingly. "Don't turn loose, fellow; the ride's over."

Then a voice came from behind him. "Don't move, mister."

Shorty raised his hands as he got to his feet, looked over his shoulder at the man who under cover of the darkness had come from the back of the house and who now stood behind him with a rifle aimed at his back.

The man said, "All right, what are you doing around here? You aren't Ballinger."

Shorty's voice held a world of relief. "I'm Shorty Madill. This is Jim lying here; he's shot up. Are you Woodford?"

"I'm Bert Woodford," the other answered. "How did it happen?"

"Kelton's men jumped us," Shorty answered impatiently. "Help me get him into the house, will you? He's been bleeding something fierce."

Young Woodford shouted, "June! Would you light the lamp?"

He and Shorty lifted Ballinger and carried him into the Woodford living room and laid him on a couch. June Adair had held the door open for them, and now she came over to the couch and looked down on Ballinger, her lips tight, but her face otherwise without expression. "What happened to him?"

"We located the missing calves in Kelton's hide-out valley. Kelton and his friends jumped up while we were at it. If I could have some hot water and some rags—"

June Adair's manner suddenly changed. She started pulling off her gloves as she spoke to young Woodford. "Bert, put some water on the stove to boil." She turned a speculative look on Shorty and ordered, "Take off his shirt and undershirt."

The schoolteacher had suddenly, by her manner, taken over the situation, giving orders as though she were accustomed to this sort of thing. Shorty's comic face twisted as he gave her a brief glance. She wore a gray skirt of some kind with a light long coat over it, and a small perky hat which sat on one side of her head. After she gave her orders, she turned and went toward a door while she was taking the coat off.

Shorty turned back to Ballinger and started working the bloody shirt and undershirt off his shoulders. Jim's eyes were closed now, but he was not unconscious; his movements indicated that he knew what was going on, and was trying to help.

THE GIRL came out of the room in a few moments, and Shorty looked at her with puzzlement. She

had made record time changing into a practical house dress with short sleeves.

Bert brought the hot water in and set it on a chair he pulled up beside the couch. She said to him, "Get one of your mother's sheets and tear it up into strips about six inches wide." Then she set about sponging off the wound with efficient hands, and after a while June had all the dried blood removed, and they could see the nature of the damage.

The girl said, "Lift him up," and Shorty got his arm around Ballinger's waist and hefted him into a sitting position so that she could see the exit wound.

"The bullet passed between the collar bone and shoulder blade," the girl said, punching around the reddened flesh with her finger; "it didn't penetrate the lung cavity."

"Ain't too serious, then?"

"Any wound is serious because of the loss of blood and the danger of infection. But this is a flesh wound, and the bullet went on through; he'll be in bad shape a while, but I wouldn't call it dangerous."

Shorty smiled his relief. "You talk like a doctor."

"I'm not—but I've done nursing; my father was a doctor."

"Then this country is lucky to have you around," Shorty said; "there ought to be a lot of this kind of work before long."

Bert Woodford spoke up. "But she won't be around; she's already packed to go back to Illinois." A faint smile hovered around the corner of his mouth as he added, "We're too primitive around here for June; I was just fixing to take her trunk out to the buckboard when you rode up."

Shorty had no knowledge of Ballinger's interest in the girl. He grinned and agreed. "She's doing the right thing, I reckon; this sure ain't going to be a place for anybody that can't stand gunsmoke."

The girl was busy wrapping the torn bits of sheet around Ballinger's shoulder, and did not look up. A groan escaped Jim, and Bert said,

"How about me giving him a drink of whiskey to take away the pain? The shock seems to be wearing off."

"No," June said with a quick flair of emotion. Then she bit her lips and was silent a moment. Then she said, "All right; give him all you want to. It doesn't really matter."

While Bert brought a glass of whiskey, and he and Shorty lifted Ballinger and placed the glass to his lips, the girl went back into the other room. Then she came out again after a moment and spoke to Bert. "Will you bring the buckboard to the front porch now, and help me with my trunk?"

Bert went outside while Shorty sat on the chair beside Ballinger, who was beginning to toss and groan. Then the door opened hastily and Bert was back in the room, standing in the doorway with his legs spread and excitement on his face. "Jim's house is afire!" he announced tightly. "Do you suppose that's Kelton's work?"

Shorty moved quickly to the door, and the girl followed them out onto the porch. The black horizon showed a red glow in the direction of Ballinger's. "They followed us down out of the hills," Shorty said. "Good thing I didn't take Jim home. I reckon Kelton is right put out; we killed his brother."

"What happened?" Bert asked.

Shorty told him the whole story now, and Bert rolled a cigarette thoughtfully while he heard it. After Shorty had finished, Bert struck a match and lit his cigarette.

"I didn't get to tell you what happened in town. A bunch of Kelton's men hit the jail in town this morning at daylight and delivered Link Valentine; they killed Sheriff Costigan in the fight. All the folks

around here are there now, to see that Kelton doesn't take control of the town. Kelton is a mad dog on wheels, and if you killed Sonny, he's probably frothing at the mouth; he thought the world of that rat of a brother of his."

"It was a pleasure to kill the skunk," Shorty opined. "But I didn't expect it to cost Jim his home."

"It will cost all of us more than that," Bert said gravely. "It doesn't matter that you did it, because Kelton was just looking for an excuse to make war on the whole town and prairie anyway. This is it, and if he's started, we'll be the next ones he hits; he'll be here as fast as he can ride."

"Then he'll get his hands on Jim," Shorty mused. "I have to get him away."

"Yeah, Jim's got to be got to safety."

"And he can't ride," Shorty said. "He couldn't sit in the saddle. We'll have to hide him somewhere."

JUNE HAD been standing silently on the dark porch, and now she asked in a subdued voice. "But who will look after him? He's going to be in pretty bad shape for a while."

"I'll look after him," Shorty answered; "he's my friend."

"You couldn't do the job," the girl said with sudden determination in her voice. "Bert, you boys put some food and blankets in the buckboard; we've got to get him to a safe place."

"But you wanted to get to town."

"Jim can't be left without attention," the girl said shortly. "I will take care of him; hurry those things, will you?"

"Where are we taking him?" Shorty asked.

"I know something of the lower reaches of these mountains," the girl said. "I know a place where he will be safe. Bert, when you've got the buggy loaded, you'd better head for town and tell the men folks that they'd better come back out here and defend their ranches rather than guarding the town. And," she added, addressing Shorty, "you would be helping if you would stay here and meet those Kelton men, and kind of decoy them in the direction opposite the one I'm taking Jim. I can look after Jim, all right."

"I don't know," Shorty answered thoughtfully. "This is not any place for a woman to be milling around with an invalid to take care of. Kelton is going to be combing this place for him."

"The way I suggested is the only sensible way we can do it," the girl answered with finality. "Now will you help Bert get Jim into the buggy? And tie his horse to the buggy; we might need it."

The girl went into the house and brought out a rifle and her coat. Shorty and Bert managed to get Ballinger into the buggy, though he was not conscious. Shorty brought along Ballinger's gun.

"He'll come out of it after a while," the girl promised them; "it's just the reaction to the wound."

"I don't like to see you do this," Bert objected; "it would be better if one of us at least went with you."

"It would not," June answered decisively. "This is an emergency, and each one of us has his own job to do. I'll make out, all right."

She got into the buggy and took the reins, setting the horse at a trot acrosse the prairie on a tangent to the road down which Kelton's men were likely to be riding.

THE ROAD ran along the foot of the mountains, and June drove the buggy in a wide arc away from the mountains, so that she would not run head-on into the men who might be coming this way from Ballinger's house. The red fire from Ballinger's house and outbuildings was before her and to her right as she kept the buggy going across the unfenced prairie. In an hour she had traversed a distance that put Ballinger's place between her and the mountains, and was again heading the animal toward the road.

Once she heard the sound of gun-

fire back in the direction of Woodford's. She waited and looked back through the darkness. The firing kept on intermittently, then began lessening in tone, as though there were a running battle, with the men going directly away from her. Satisfied that Shorty was decoying Kelton's men in the other direction, she continued her trip until she reached the schoolhouse at the foot of the mountains.

She passed up an old logging road which ran into the wooded foot of the mountains near the school, and followed its dark and twisted path for another half hour. It was well after midnight now, she judged, and so dark under the trees that she did not attempt to guide the horse, but left him to pick his way as best he could up the dark trail.

They came at last to the face of a high cliff which shone gray by moonlight, and here at the bottom of an almost impassible gorge she stopped the buggy and wrapped the reins around the whip. This was a spot June knew well from having taken her pupils picknicking and berry hunting. It was wild and almost impenetrable except for the old rutted logging trail which petered out here at the foot of a waterfall.

There was a cave here, eaten out in generations past by a twisting current of some long vanished stream; here she unloaded the provisions and blankets Bert had stored in the back of the buckboard, and spread the quilts on the floor of the cave.

When this was done and she went back to the buggy for Ballinger, she found him again half conscious; but his head was hanging as though he were thoroughly drunk. "Jim, I've got to get you out of the buggy. Can you help yourself a little?"

Between falling and gripping the buggy, and with her half supporting him, Ballinger got to the ground; with her arm around him, he followed her staggeringly to the cave, entirely unconscious of where he was or who was with him.

June laid him down on the quilts that hardly softened the rocky floor of the cave, and gave him more whiskey out of the bottle Bert had put with the provisions. For the first time he seemed to be aware of her. "I thought you were against whiskey," he mumbled.

"This is medicine; take all you can, Jim."

She held the bottle while he took a few more swallows. Then he fell back exhausted on the quilt and was again in a restless sleep. She had felt his body trembling as she held him up, and she knew that the terrible weakness of shock and loss of blood had left him exhausted. His face, bruised from the fight, whiskered and gray, was drawn in tight lines of pain.

She watched him a moment in the darkness, then went out, and, after a great deal of difficulty, got the buggy turned around in the brush and headed back down the trail. She got in, and, still leading Jim's horse, drove back down the mountain and three miles across the prairie at right angles to the road before she stopped the buggy and got out.

Now she untied the lariat with which she had led the saddle horse and replaced the bits in the animal's mouth and mounted. Facing the buggy horse toward Woodford's, she lashed the animal into a trot, following Jim's horse until she knew that the buggy horse would not stop until he got back to Woodfords lot. Three miles off the road, and making its way over prairie land, the horse and buggy would not be seen from the road until it had returned to

Woodford's. And moving over green grass, come morning there would be no trail for Kelton's men to back-track.

She had done the best she could do to hide herself and Jim from Kelton's men. She turned her saddle horse and started back up to the cave.

10

NOW, FOR the first time, June had a chance to wonder what she had been doing, and why she had done it. The very fact of her having done anything to take a hand in the fight between these people was itself a shock to her. She had been too emphatic in her conviction that civilized people settled their differences peacefully, not to be surprised to find herself involved in such action.

Riding Ballinger's horse through the dark hostile range, June gave herself to the problem of why she was here. Why had she suddenly dropped her first decision to leave this violent land? And why had she projected herself into this range trouble by taking one of the men involved and hiding him in a cave in the mountains? It did not make sense; it violated all her previous ideas of how she wanted to live her life. What was wrong with her?

June had always had a strong sense of duty toward her neighbors; that had been trained into her by her doctor father, who had devoted his life to caring for the people in and around the little farming settlement back in Illinois where she had lived—and where she had worked as her father's nurse in caring for people she had always known. She had thought that she could be of still more use by teaching the young in places where such teachers were most needed, and had found her place here.

She had liked these people; she admired their independence and their helpfulness toward their neighbors—up to a certain point. June did not like their attitude toward the law.

Here in this new country, there were vague forms of the law, but it had little effectiveness, and she was unused to seeing men handle their own justice in such a direct fashion. She was convinced that law and order were the prime requisites of civilized people; she could not understand why otherwise solid citizens took it upon themselves to settle their own differences instead of appealing to such law as there was.

June could not conceive of law being weaker than the people it was supposed to protect; she could not adjust herself to the fact that substantial people ignored the law, put themselves above it, and attempted to settle their own affairs. They were good men, men like Jim Ballinger and the Woodfords.

Jim Ballinger was typical of them; young and strong, and a born leader, he was a man who had an innate sense of justice. He worked hard played hard, and fought hard. He had a personal magnetism; he was a laughing man, brimming full of the vitality of life. His smile went out and enfolded you in its warm friendliness. She had seen these things in him, and had been drawn toward him by them.

And yet, Jim was a man who had little respect for the law; he felt that he was better able to settle his difficulties than was the constituted authority. In short, he was a law unto himself.

It was not his personality that she had resisted; she had been drawn to him by all the strong qualities she admired in him. It was that self-sufficiency in him that she fought against. He did not live a life governed by law; he did not recognize its being greater than himself. This was lawlessness; it was the attitude that seemed to be adopted by even the most responsible people. It was one which June could not condone.

And it was this attitude in Jim Ballinger which made her resist him. She could not, by accepting him, accept the viewpoint which set

these people outside the bounds of civilized living.

June believed that Ballinger got just what he deserved when he was wounded, as the result of taking the law into his own hands. She excused her own interest in his welfare on the grounds that she had been trained by her father to sacrifice her own interest to serve those who needed her.

Now, as she rode toward the cave where she had secreted Ballinger, she faced these things; she was honest enough with herself to doubt that her ethics sufficiently accounted for her interest in the man. There was the pull of his personal magnetism that she had to fight; she was here with him because the woman's feeling for the man drove her to come to him when he needed her.

That was the thing she was going to have to fight against if she were to abide by her determination not to become involved in this brutal war of man against man. She wanted Jim but she wanted no part of his outlook on life. And, in coming here where she would be near him for a while, June had put herself in a position where both sides of the struggle within her would have their opportunity to thresh it out. She was exposing herself to a fight which she knew would be desperate. She had not wanted to do this; perhaps the woman in her had already won the first round.

JUNE GOT back to the cave and hid the saddle horse well before dawn. She found Ballinger lying on his back on the blankets with eyes wide open but hardly seeing anything. He looked at her briefly when she came in; then his eyes went back to the ceiling of the rocky cavern, and he did not speak.

The things he had gone through; culminating in the serious wound, had left him drained of all strength and interest. Jim's face was drawn and haggard, his lips tight together against the pain in him. He was hovering somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness.

She sat down on the quilt beside him, and her hand on his forehead felt the fever rising in him. "Close your eyes and try to sleep," June urged him. "You must have some rest. Do you want some more whiskey?"

Ballinger nodded, and she got the whiskey and held his head while he drank out of a tin cup. Then when his head had dropped back down, and his eyes were closed, he began a deep but irregular breathing, tossing and making small sounds in his throat.

She lay down on the quilts beside him, resting against the time when he would be awake and need her, dozing fitfully.

Just before daylight June went out of the cave and built a small fire, where she made coffee and fried some bacon; then she put the fire out again and covered the cinders with dirt.

Bringing the coffee into the cave in a tin cup, she watched Ballinger's labored breathing for a while, and felt the fever in his face before she awakened him. Her hand on his forehead brought his eyes open and he looked at her wonderingly for a while, revealing his complete lack of knowledge of the last few hours.

"Try to take a little of this coffee," she told him. "Here, I'll help you raise your head; don't try to sit up."

Jim sipped the hot black liquid, submissively, and it seemed to bring a little strength back to him. When his head dropped back on the quilt, he had lain there a while apparently trying to think things out. "Where are we?" he asked. "Where's Shorty?"

She told him everything that had happened from the time Shorty had brought him to the Woodford's.

"I remember Shorty bringing me down out of the mountains," he said, "but I reckon I slipped a cog after that. So they burned me out, did they?"

"Yes," she answered. "And they've started war against the town." She then told him what she had heard, of the killing of the sheriff and the delivery of Valentine from the jail.

"That means," Ballinger said, "that Kelton thinks he's strong enough to

take over everything now; what are Woodford and the others doing about it?"

"They all gathered in town, expecting Kelton to try to take it over," the girl answered. "But Kelton must be splitting his forces, using some of them to capture the town and the others to drive everybody from their ranches."

"We can't defend both places at once," Ballinger said thoughtfully, "and Kelton knows it. Well, I've got to get out of here. I can't be wasting time lying around."

"You will just have to forget everything but lying around here wasting time," the girl said firmly; "you're not even over the shock of your wound yet. You have a high fever, and you've lost a lot of blood. There's nothing you can do except to keep quiet while your wound heals and you recover your strength."

"I just can't do that," Ballinger said firmly; "there simply isn't time. You say you've got my horse here?"

"Yes, but he's hidden out from Kelton's men. And you aren't going to find him either." There was a firmness in her voice that left him no room for argument. And pretty soon he was asleep again, entirely unconscious of how weak he was.

THE DAY ran on its slow pace and Ballinger slept in small stretches of time between periods of wakefulness. The fever still burned in him, and he would not eat. He was more restless during his sleeping spells; she knew that, in his sleep, he was revealing the torment in him which he kept concealed while he was awake.

June spent most of her time sitting with him, watching him sleep, bringing him water for his unquenchable thirst when he woke up.

And in trying to fight off that thing within her which attracted her to him.

No matter how much she kept telling herself that it was merely sympathy for a suffering human which drew her to Jim, her common sense and her own womanliness told her a different story. She knew the truth now, and it frightened her. She found herself arguing against his own activity which had brought about this wound—and the next moment she found herself arguing that nobody could expect any self-respecting human being to allow himself to be robbed and cheated without trying to do something about it. The trouble with Ballinger and his friends was, she believed, that they were doing the wrong thing about it.

Late in the afternoon, she heard a rifle shot and its repeated echoes bouncing through the mountains somewhere in the distance; a moment later she heard two answering shots from farther away. June did not know the ways of the wild bunch in the mountains, but her common sense told her that these were signal shots, and she was convinced that Kelton's men were scouring the mountains for Ballinger.

If that were so, it would be only a matter of time until somebody discovered the tracks leading to the cave. Then they would be trapped. She felt a great fear now for Ballinger's safety, for she knew that he was not yet in any condition to travel to town.

At sunset she was exhausted and lay down beside Ballinger to rest. She fell asleep unintentionally, and when she awoke it was daylight; Ballinger, having turned over onto his right side, was wide awake and looking at her.

Confused, she sat up. "I must have been more tired than I realized," she apologized; "how do you feel?"

"A little weak," he confessed. "I guess I've hung around longer than I should have, too. I just heard a couple of shots back in the trees somewhere. We'd better get out; they're narrowing down on us."

She got to her feet. "I'll get you some coffee," she said. "Could you eat something?"

"I could eat about half a cow for a starter."

As she made the coffee and fried

the bacon, June was surprised to find an overwhelming gladness in her because the crisis in Ballinger's condition had passed and she knew that he would live. For a time she was experiencing a sense of great joy at preparing a meal for him, as though he were now her man. Now she realized how great a strain she had been under.

She brought him the coffee and the bacon, and when she lifted him to a sitting position with his back against the wall of the cave, she was leaning over him, and some inner compulsion drove her to kiss him. As she drew back, she saw surprise in his own face; June was surprised at herself, and confused.

She tried to pass it off. "That was just for your encouragement," she said lightly. "I thought it might make you feel better."

Jim did not answer her, but sat thoughtfully eating his bacon and bread, and drinking his coffee.

AT NOON there were more shots in the hills back of them, but closer this time; late in the afternoon, the shots came from still closer.

Ballinger had been lying on his back, still and thinking, and getting his rest. It would have been foolish to have tried to get away in the daytime; he was trying to build up enough energy to get away when night came, hoping that the searchers would not locate them before darkness would permit them to escape.

That kiss had come between them during the day, and they were restrained in their talk. Ballinger could not make out its meaning in the light of his past experience with her. She knew its meaning only too well, and she had to fight against the thing it meant.

When the sun had dropped behind a peak, leaving a dusky shadow in the hollow, June said, "Do you think we'll be safe here for another night? You need as much rest as you can get."

"Another night would mean another night and day. No, they're getting too close, and they know these mountains as well as we do. They'd find us tomorrow. I can make it."

"Then I'll get the horse and get him saddled before dark."

"I don't like for you to expose yourself any more," he told her. "I can probably find him; I've got to get back into circulation anyway."

Ballinger made an awkward effort to get up, and the girl took his arm and helped him. She could feel the trembling of his body as he tried standing. "You shouldn't be on your feet yet," she said. "I wouldn't let you get up if it were even half-safe here."

"Well, it's not, so I'm getting us out of here."

"I'll bring the horse," she said cheerfully. "You lie back down and get all the rest you can. It's a long ride to town, and I don't want you passing out on me again."

"I've been a nuisance," he said; "you should have let Shorty come along to look after me."

June looked at him strangely, then turned to leave the cave. He would never know the moments of possessiveness she had felt while she was taking care of him. She went out, caught the horse, and brought him to the cave mouth. Ballinger, moving about weakly, gave her a hand at getting the saddle on him. She looked at him speculatively. "I'm going to change that bandage before we start," she announced. "That old one is pretty dirty for you to be appearing in town with. It's a shame we couldn't have brought along a shirt for you."

June worked the old bandage off except where it was stuck to the wound with dry blood; she cut it loose from the stuck part with his pocket knife. Then she took fresh strips of the sheet she had brought along, and while he was standing in front of her, she began the awkward and intricate job of applying a new shoulder bandage.

THAT WAS when she saw the moving shadow outside the cave. Ballinger was standing facing her with his back to the cave entrance, so that she first saw the movement over his shoulder.

June's hands froze on the job; she listened, but did not hear any footsteps. And the shadow which she had seen was so much a part of the tangle of stationary lights and shades on the ground outside the cave mouth that she was not sure that she had seen anything at all. But in her state of anxiety, her heart amost stopped beating.

"What's the matter?" Ballinger asked as she stood motionless, her eyes sharply watching the outside, her mouth tight. He was standing with his good arm upraised and entangled with loose strips of the sheeting, his useless arm being bandaged to his side.

He heard the breath coming sharp through her nostrils and started turning.

But she had no time to wait for him to understand—for the man was coming into the cave mouth with a rifle held before him. She dropped to the floor as though falling, landing on Ballinger's gunbelt, and grabbed the weapon out of its pouch the instant her hand came into contact with it.

The man coming into the cave stopped a moment to let his eyes adjust to the deeper blackness, then started raising his rifle.

The girl lifted Ballinger's heavy .45 with both hands, thumbed the hammer back and pulled the trigger, all in one unconscious motion. The cave rocked with a confined blast whose concussion shook them, and the gray smoke of the black powder filled the cave.

But not before she and Ballinger had seen the man fall forward in a slow smooth motion, and had heard his rifle and his body hit the cave floor.

Ballinger reached backward and took the gun out of her hand, then went forward. As the smoke cleared away he saw the man lying face down in the entrance of the cave. He used the toe of his boot to turn the intruder over, and he and the girl stood over the body and looked long at the beaten and swollen face of the dead man.

"Mack Stitch," Ballinger said. "Kelton's foreman—the one I had the fight with."

June made no reply, but stood looking at the dead man with a kind of horrified fascination. Her eyes were filled with both surprise and terror, and something was going on in her which held her speechless.

Ballinger placed an arm around her. "You couldn't help it," he assured her. "You did the only thing that could have saved you from something pretty terrible."

Her answer was vague, as though she were trying to make herself understand what she was saying. "I killed him," she said; after a moment, she repeated, "I killed a man."

Then, after another long moment, realization seemed to burst full upon her; she turned and buried her head in Ballinger's chest, and sobbed. "Oh, Jim. I've killed a man! What can I do? I've k''led him."

He ran his fingers through her hair gently. "You couldn't help it," he told her; "there was nothing else you could have done."

"Oh, it's terrible. I don't know what I'll do."

"Now listen to me, June," he said. "I know it is going to be rough on you for a while. But you are a strong woman, and you're going to see this thing through. You've always been a believer in the law, and it's going to be hard for you to understand what you've done. But let me give you this idea; there's a higher law than that which men make and break. It's the law of self-preservation; and the laws that men make are only their faulty efforts to enforce this higher law. When the laws that men make to protect themselves are not strong enough to do the job, then it is necessary for people to go on and preserve themselves by other means. That is what you have done, and when the shock of this thing has worn off somewhat, you will see that you couldn't have done otherwise."

"But—"

"Don't argue with me now; don't try to believe or deny what I've said. Just remember it while you're working out this thing in your own

mind. Now try to forget it, and let's get out of here. There'll be others of Kelton's men coming to see what the shot was all about."

He led her out of the cave. "Now if you'll give me a boost onto this horse," he said, "I'll try to find Stitch's horse. It's bound to be close, and we can make better time on both of them. Bring his rifle along, too."

11

DOCTOR BENSON lived in a small white frame house in the edge of Beaver. There was a big barn at the rear of the house for his buggy horses and his cow; between the kitchen door of his house and the barn there was a small shed used as a milk house. Underneath the floor of the milk house was a rock-walled cellar where the milk was kept cool.

There was now a cot in this cellar, and a chair beside the cot. There, in the daytime, Jim Ballinger was recovering from his wound. The selection of his hiding place had come after considerable discussion and argument between himself and Benson and June at the time she had brought him here from the mountain hideout.

Kelton's men were still on his trail; they had invaded the town, and, knowing that he was wounded, had twice searched the doctor's house with drawn guns. Ballinger did not want to endanger the doctor by staying at his place, but Benson wanted him close, so that he could keep his eyes on Jim's wound. Though Ballinger was recovering fast, he was still weak from loss of blood, and there was still danger of infection.

Ballinger at last had agreed to keep hidden in the cellar during the daytime; but he reserved the right to move about at his own risk at night. This was the best that the doctor could get out of him in the way of a promise to keep quiet.

June stayed in the house with Mrs. Benson. She insisted on looking after Ballinger, and in carrying his messages. He was restless, and he had enough message-carrying to keep her active; he hoped that this activity would keep her from brooding on the fact that she had killed a man.

Half a dozen of the more important ranchers had brought their womenfolk to town for safety, and they had been moving fully armed between town and the ranches.

They had all pulled their cattle off the more open range, throwing their herds together for better protection with less men. At the same time, they got together with a few of the more responsible businessmen of the town and organized a vigilance committee; each man was appointed a deputy sheriff under John LaBosket, who had taken over the sheriff's office at the death of Costigan.

The town and the range was hovering in nervous anticipation of Kelton's next move. Kelton was smart and hungry for power; the killing of his brother, and the attempt to hang one of his men, legally, had been direct slaps in the face. He was angered to the point where he would stop at nothing in forcing a showdown.

There was no way of telling how many men Kelton could muster. The Jackforks were full of lawless riders who would welcome nothing better than the complete sweeping clean of the range and the mastery of the town of Beaver. It w n't just the money the cattle would bring; it was a matter of personal triumph over the forces of law. That was a thing that they could fight for and enjoy.

ON BALLINGER'S third night in the cellar, Bert Woodford came in. He was one of the few that Ballinger had allowed June to tell of his whereabouts. Bert and Jim sat in the damp cellar with only a dim coal oil lantern

for light, and Woodford brought Ballinger up to date on the way things were going.

"Luther Cole," Bert said, "has been scouting out in the mountains, looking for those calves you and your friend Shorty ran into. He got back to our place today with some real news. The bunch of yearlings is right where Shorty said it was, but the nursing calves and their step-Mammies are gone. Drove away, I reckon, to keep us from finding them again."

"I didn't get to examine that older stuff to see if it was ours," Ballinger answered. "Though I reckon we could find some of my dimes and Laney's under their hides."

"Yeah," Bert answered. "Luther had plenty of time to poke around, he says, and he found some of them dimes; it's our stuff, all right."

"Good. We've got to get that stuff back, but we can't get it without a fight. We'll have to corner Kelton first and have it out with him; he'll be watching those calves, now that we're on his tail."

"Here's the break for us. It's what Luther wanted me to talk to you about. He stopped off in Pinetop, and run into one of Kelton's men there. Had some drinks with him, and the man spilled his guts. Kelton is not at his ranch; he got nicked in that fight with you, and he rode down to Durant to get patched up. Looks like you two tagged each other."

"I didn't know it," Ballinger admitted, "but I wish I'd finished the job. So he's not riding the hills now."

"No. He told his men to scatter till he got back and sent for them. Jim, you won't be able to ride; but the rest of us should get organized right quick, and go and get that stuff back before Kelton gets back on the job and gets rid of it. That's Luther's idea."

"Just what I was thinking," Ballinger answered sharply. "But I'm going along; I can ride, even if I've got only one hand to shoot with."

"Luther thought you might be able to go along, but you're not in shape to make a ride like that. June said you weren't."

"We might not get a chance like this again," Ballinger insisted. "I'm going. How about you getting in touch with your dad and the rest of them at your place. Tell them to meet me at Pinetop."

"No use to try to stop you," Bert said, shaking his head. "All right, if you insist."

"Seen anything of Shorty yet?"

"No," Bert admitted. "Last I saw of him, like I told you yesterday, was when him and me drew Kelton and his men away from our house when June took you to the mountain. He waited until Kelton got just about on top of him before he started the fireworks; they may have got their hands on him."

"I don't believe it," Ballinger answered. "That runt is a hard man to kill. He's around somewhere—and busy."

"You don't think he decided the job was too hot for him, do you?"

"Shorty? Not a chance. The hotter it is the better he likes it. He'll jaw at you with every breath, but he won't run out on you. Now get going. I'm going to saddle up; you boys catch up with me on the road to Pinetop."

BALLINGER'S own horse had not been brought to the doctor's house for fear it might be seen; they went out into the lot, and Bert saddled one of the doctor's animals for Jim. Bert was helping him buckle his gun on by the lot gate when June came out.

"Jim!" she cried angrily. "You come back here; you can't go riding around in your condition."

"I'm sorry, June," he told her, "but it has to be done."

He gave her the news Bert had brought. "You see, this is our first chance to get our stock back."

"You simply can't do it," the girl insisted.

Ballinger was leaning against the gate post and she was standing near him in the darkness. "I know

how you feel about men fighting to protect themselves," he said kindly. "And I understand why you feel that way. I even wish it were possible for people here to live the way you think they should live. But things simply are not the way you'd like them to be around here. We have to do things we don't like to do, whether you understand or approve of them or not. We just have no choice. I'm sorry, June."

The girl was silent a moment; then her voice came low and halting—as though she weren't sure he would believe what she was going to say. "You don't understand," she said. "I don't think the way I once thought about these things. I know now that you're doing the only thing you can do under the circumstances."

He tried to make out the expression on her face, but he could only see its whiteness. "Do you mean to say that you've changed your whole point of view?"

She laid a hand on his arm. "Yes," she said. "I understand, now, what you meant when you talked to me after I'd shot that man. I couldn't have done anything else under the circumstances, could I?"

"Not a thing," he answered; "I'm glad you've made your peace with yourself."

"I have, Jim. The reason I don't want you to go out tonight is—well, you're still too weak to be riding."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But this is one time I've got to disobey the nurse."

Bert gave him a hand up onto the horse, and they set off while June Adair stood in the doctor's back yard and watched them disappear into the darkness. She stood clasping her hands tensely, and her eyes welled up with tears. She knew that she was afraid for him; she no longer denied her feeling for him, but faced the fact squarely and accepted it as a condition that life had set out for her.

She had fought her fight in these last days at the doctor's house; now she knew where she stood. She had learned to understand these people in that moment when she had grabbed up the pistol and shot Kelton's outlaw foreman. The shot had branded her with the brand of the pioneer. When she pulled the trigger she severed herself from her past, and welded herself to this land and these people. Her past was buried, her future was here.

These things she knew beyond question, and knowing, accepted them with all the firmness that was in her.

■

WHILE Bert Woodford rode off to round up a crew of men, Ballinger took the road to Pinetop at a slow pace to conserve his energy. At about midnight he stopped at a point a mile short of Pinetop and waited until the others came straggling in and joined him. Luther Cole and Troy Laney rode in together, and old J. B. Woodford came on a little later, wearing two handguns and carrying a rifle in his saddle sheath. With him came Pat Malone, wearing blue serge pants and a white shirt and derby hat, and smoking a fat cigar.

"What are you doing here, Pat?" Ballinger asked. "You belong in town."

The genial saloonkeeper grinned at him. "Running a store is a confining job; a man needs a little exercise once in a while."

Malone had a deer rifle slung in a holster from his saddle horn, and wore a gold plated pistol in a shoulder holster high on his left chest.

"You should have left those things at home," Ballinger said. "A man can get hurt playing with guns."

Malone's hand flashed to his chest and came out with the shining handgun in a surprising burst of speed. "I want to tell you gully-jumpers something," he said. "You wear your gun down around your ankles, twelve or fifteen inches from your hands. Then you've got to lift it another two feet to aim it. My pistol is not six inches from my hand when I'm playing poker. Did you ever stop to realize that the

difference in the distance you've got to juggle a weapon can amount to quite a fatal length of time? That's a simple truth you boys overlook, but I've seen such neglect prove right deadly to the overlooker."

"I didn't know you were a professional gunman," Ballinger smiled. "You looked more the duck-behind-the-bar type. And to think you'd been concealing a tailor-made gun all along; I'd have been afraid to drink in your place if I'd known it."

"I'm not a professional gunman," Malone answered. "I took this gun away from a professional with my bare hands in a poker game. He was one of those that thought he ought to wear a gun low on his hip; he's not around any more."

"Still, I don't figure you coming along and helping us kill off your own customers."

"Tell you, Jim. Kelton's men no longer enjoy my hospitality. Bunch of 'em came in after they'd killed Costigan, and took charge. They drank up and carted off about fifty dollars' worth of my choice likker. I asked for my money and they gave me a horse laugh and asked me what I was going to do about it? Imagine asking an Irishman a question like that." He spun the fancy gun on his finger. "What I intend to do about it is to have the pleasure of puncturing a few of them buzzards and letting my liquor run out of them."

"Well, it's your hide you're risking. Come along if it suits you."

Bert Woodford rode up with three or four hands from the various ranches, and their party got under way. With Ballinger and Luther Cole in the lead they took the trail uphill which Jim had followed at the time he ran into Shorty. Following Cole's lead, they located the yearling herd without trouble.

THERE WAS a quarter moon shining over the bowl of grass, and it was light enough for them to quickly round up the grazing calves and bunch them. "You know how they got them here?" Ballinger asked Cole.

"Yeah. I backtracked them down through the woods clear to the prairie. An old logging road half grown up. They brought 'em in that way, and we can take 'em out the same way."

"All right," Ballinger said to the group; "string 'em out and let's get going."

"I know the way out," Luther Cole said. "I'll take point."

Cole led them to a pass between two rocks, and they strung the calves through it, Laney and Bert Woodford taking flank, others falling in alongside; old J. B Woodford and Ballinger swung into the rear.

The calves moved easily under the silence of the men, who did not push them too fast; only an occasional unexcited bawling and the trampling of hooves broke the stillness. Out of the grassy bowl, they hit the trees, and complete darkness settled down upon them. An occasional voice came from ahead as a driver pushed the stock back into ranks; now and then a match flared redly for a brief moment while a man lit up a cigarette.

"That was easy," old Woodford said. "It gets some of our stuff back, anyhow."

"We're not out of these woods yet," Ballinger reminded him.

"What's the matter? You think this is a trick or something?"

"I don't know a thing," Jim answered. "It's just that I can't somehow picture taking this stock back without trouble; it's too easy. There's a feeling growing in me."

Woodford's laugh had the suggestion that he was trying to convince himself that there was nothing to be uneasy about. "Hell," he snorted. "You pinked Kelton and he pinked you. You was laid up, and he was laid up, but you got on your feet first. Nothing to it."

A long silence fell while the string of calves made a twisting descent of the mountain, following the old logging road down hill. The blackness was complete, except on

occasions when the treetops thinned out so that slanting arrows of moonlight broke through to mark the moving backs of cattle and men.

They came finally to the shallow crossing of a stream, and slowed the stock down to drink. The land surrounding the crossing flattened out from its usual slope, and there was a clearing here with an old log shanty at its far edge. As the cattle drank and were pushed on past the stream, they collected here and milled about.

Ballinger lit a cigarette, and by the light of the match, looked at his watch. "About an hour till daylight," he said. "I wish we were out of here."

"Still jumpy?" Woodford asked.

"Yeah. It's growing on me."

"You're not fighting Indians," the old man laughed. "You're with friends."

BALLINGER felt the warning somewhere about his spine—"What's the trouble up front?" he asked shortly. "Why don't they string out?" He raised his voice. "Hey, Luther, what's holding you up?"

A voice came back to him over the sound of the milling calves. "Nothing. We're trying to get 'em strung out!"

"What's holding you up?" Ballinger repeated.

Jim got no answer. His senses rising quickly to alertness, he glanced around. The postoak timber made a black panoramic curtain around the calves. The rest of the riders—those who had been riding swing—were scattered around the herd. None of the calves had yet pointed toward the lower side of the timber where they should have strung out to go on downhill.

Ballinger came up sharply in his saddle, standing in his stirrups. "Bert," he yelled. "Go up and see what's holding Luther up. Get this stuff strung out."

Woodford came up alongside him. "Damned funny," he said, suddenly catching Ballinger's tenseness. "What's wrong? Come on, Jim." He pushed his horse forward, circling the herd.

Ballinger heard Bert calling, "Luther! Where are you? What's wrong?"

There was a nervous excitement arising in the herd, reflecting the tension of the men. "Hell of a note," Woodford barked, yanking his rifle out from under his leg. "I don't like this—"

Ballinger caught a glimpse of smaller blacker shadows moving in the trees, heard a growling human voice somewhere in the darkness off to his left. His nerves went fiddle-string tight; a cold wave spread up his spine and chilled his face. He was pulling his pistol as he spoke. "We're into something, man."

"Yeah," Woodford growled. "By Gawd—"

Somebody else discovered something wrong, and everybody was shouting at once.

Then the night was split apart with a sudden explosion of rifle fire. Around the edges of the clearing a string of orange flashes of flame marked the rifles of men hidden in the woods.

"Like fish in a trap!" old Woodford roared. "By Gawd!"

12

BALLINGER was trying to turn his horse. "Hit the woods," he yelled.

Woodford's animal pushed against his own, driven to his knees by a bullet. Woodford went out of the saddle, landed on his feet and dashed back toward the trees. Ballinger turned his horse to cover him. He saw Woodford go to his knees, then crawl the remaining few feet until the darkness of the woods swallowed him up.

The noise was deafening; men shouted, guns roared, and the cattle stampeded in a sudden panic, milling and trying to fight their way out of the clearing.

Jim emptied his gun at muzzle flashes in the edge of the woods. Snapping the firing pin on an empty shell, he turned his horse toward the woods, dismounted in the dark and stood behind a big tree while he reloaded.

His left arm was in a sling, his left hand almost useless. Ballinger held the gun in it while he ejected shells and restuffed the cylinder with shells from his jumper pocket. Steers were grunting, and dying, and going crazy out there in the clearing; men were yelling and trying to make their way out of the exposed territory.

This was one of Kelton's cleverest tricks, Ballinger saw. It was planned from the beginning; it had to be! Kelton had played possum, had got word down to one of the valley men, and thus lured the most important of the ranchers up into a death trap. With them dead and out of the way, he could easily handle the rest of them.

These thoughts came to Jim as he was reloading his gun. Now, clicking the cylinder back into place, Ballinger worked his way through the edge of the woods. Here and there he came upon one of the Kelton horses tied to a tree; he shot them down coldly, cutting off escape by Kelton's boys.

Lead was whining through the trees like disturbed hornets, and the sounds of the battle rose and fell with a regular rhythm. Jim was alongside the line of Kelton men; he judged their positions and fired behind the flashes of their rifles. Some of his own friends were out there in the milling cattle. He could see two or three forms on horseback; others had lost their horses and were barricaded behind the bodies of calves that had fallen before the withering fire of lead.

One of the Kelton men stepped out of the shadows, standing up for a better aim at one of Ballinger's friends on horseback. Jim laid his gun on the man and pulled the trigger. The man screamed and pitched on his face.

And it was then that Ballinger discovered that he had walked into a nest of Kelton men; he was surrounded by them, cut off.

"There's one," somebody yelled, and the air around Jim was filled for the moment with flying lead. He darted across a small patch of moonlight to get closer to one of the men, and somebody recognized him. "That's Ballinger," came a yelling voice. "Cut him down."

Ballinger dived behind the big trunk of a deadfall tree and laid his gunbarrel across it. "Come and get me," he said under his breath, and shot the rushing man down in his tracks. The man fell in the moonlight with his head not a yard from the tree. Ballinger slid over the tree trunk and jammed the man's two pistols in his belt; he had no time to reload his own weapon.

Two more men tried to close in on him, and he blasted them one at a time as they came through the patch of moonlight. He was not wasting his few shells, but taking deliberate aim.

Now he crawled the length of the concealing deadfall tree, and here in the deeper darkness he continued scouting the clearing. Rounding a tree he bumped squarely into a Kelton man. The man whirled; Ballinger jammed his pistol squarely into the man's guts and pulled the trigger. The man doubled over, bent in the middle, and went down on his face. Ballinger threw away his empty gun and took one out of the dead man's hands.

Now there were no more men on horseback in the clearing, and the firing was slackening off somewhat. His friends had got into the protective shadows of the trees, and Kelton's advantage was lost.

Here and there a quick fusillade of fire would break out and die down again, and then after a while there was quiet. Kelton's men did not like fighting men who were as well hidden as theirselves.

THE BATTLE was over with the same suddenness with which it had started. A few dead and wounded calves lay on their sides

and bawled; the sounds of men and horses and calves breaking through the brush was all the noise there was to be heard. Gradually the sound of Kelton's retiring men died out in the distance, swallowed up by the trees.

Ballinger waited around a long time, alert and suspicious. After a while he called out, "Bert! Troy! Luther! All right?"

Luther Cole came out into the clearing from the dark rim, and asked, "What was all the shouting about before this thing happened? Who saw the beginning?"

Bert came up, and his father came limping out of the woods. Troy Laney joined them in the huddle, and three or four of the riders from their ranches came up.

"Anybody missing?" Ballinger asked.

They checked themselves over. "J. B.'s got a slight flesh wound," Troy said. "I lost my hat and a piece of skin off the side of my face when I hit the dirt. Hey, Pat, what happened to you?"

The saloonkeeper came up to the crowd, his pistol hanging in his hand. His black derby had been jammed down on his head so that the brim was torn from the crown, and rested over his ears. His vest was split up the back and the sleeves of his white shirt were in pennants. One knee of his blue serge pants was torn in a square patch that showed his knee and most of his leg.

Malone took both hands to pull the hatbrim up off his face. He held his hat in his hand and looked at it, then sailed it out into the woods.

"I never was hard on clothes," he observed, "but I don't know when I ever minded the wear on 'em any less than I do now. Jim, I bet I drained ten gallons of my whiskey out of the guts of them boys. I punctured 'em right and left."

Suddenly Troy Laney keeled over and fell flat on the ground. Ballinger knelt over him, running hands over his body, stopping at one of his legs. "The guy was shot and didn't know it," he said. "Bert, get a hatful of water at the creek."

They brought Laney out of his faint and bandaged up his leg. Cole caught his horse for him and they boosted him onto it.

"That's about all here," Ballinger said. "We couldn't round that stuff out of these hills in less than a day and Kelton would have another dose for us before we were through. Let's get out of here."

"Might as well follow this road down to the flats," Luther Cole said. "Quickest way out of these woods."

Bert said, "Say, Luther. What held you back getting that stuff strung out after it got through drinking?"

"I don't know," Cole answered. "The stuff was spooky; it didn't want to hit the woods. Smelled them jaspers, I reckon."

"Cows can smell people a far way off," Bert admitted. "We should have had a cow ride point for us; he'd have warned us."

"You are not saying I should have known they were laying for us, are you?" Cole answered sharply.

There had never been much liking for Cole by the younger men of the valley. He was about thirty and unmarried; he had a good ranch and made lots of money, and he had a way with the girls that the single boys without so much money didn't like. Particularly, they didn't like the way he made his play both for the fast girls around the deadfalls and also for the decent girls of the range and the town. A man usually kept a sharp dividing line between the two types, but Cole was one of the few men who would be seen on the street with one of the sporting girls, and then later with one of the respectable girls. Bert had not been backward about expressing his opinion that this was an insult to the nice girls, but his friends had laid his open anger to jealousy. The hard-working boys didn't care much for a sport, though they had to admit that Cole knew how to make money out of cattle.

They rode down out of the mountains in silence, and it was daylight

when they broke out into the prairie. They were a thoroughly dejected bunch, and both old man Woodford and Troy Laney needed medical attention.

Only Pat Malone seemed to be in high spirits. For a town man living the dull life of a saloonkeeper, he had had a large night which he would not soon forget. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll ride on into town and tell Doc to come out and meet you. Where you going to be at?"

Bert Woodford said, "Better tell him to come to our place. It's the shortest distance for the wounded men to ride."

●

AT WOODFORD'S, they got the old man to bed in one room and Troy Laney on a couch, and did the best they could at fixing up temporary dressings. While they were working, a horseman rode up and called, asking for Ballinger. Bert went to the door and brought Shorty in.

"Where the hell have you been?" Ballinger asked.

Shorty grinned at him. "Where the hell have *you* been?"

"In the mountains mostly," Ballinger admitted. "What with recovering from one gunshot wound and flirting with another. You've been missing things. What happened to you?"

"Me? Why I've been in the mountains, too. While I was playing tag with them Kelton lads the other night I decided I didn't like the saddle I was riding; so I took a notion that after the game was over I'd ride back up there where we had that trouble and get my own saddle off that dead horse. I lost Kelton's boys after I got them off your trail, and hit for the mountains."

"Get your saddle?"

"Yes, and lost it again," Shorty said; "but I didn't get the main thing I was looking for."

"What was that?"

"The answer to that riddle we found up there; how some them cows was all fresh and didn't have any calves of their own, nor any husbands around. That's still as much of a mystery to me as it ever was. And things like that worry me."

Shorty had not met any of the men except Bert Woodford, whom he had met at the end of Bert's rifle the night he brought Ballinger in. Now Jim introduced him to all the others, and they shook hands all around.

"Learn anything we ought to know?" Ballinger asked him after the introductions.

"Well, nothing you could come right out and make any clear statement about. What have you been doing? I been asking around for you, and couldn't learn much. Seemed like everybody that I heard knew you was gone somewhere. Even Pat Malone wasn't around."

Ballinger told Shorty what had happened, beginning with Luther Cole's getting the information from the drunk up at Jake's store at Pinetop, and ending with their landing in Kelton's trap at the creek near the foot of the mountains. Shorty listened in silence, squatting on a bootheel in front of the dead fireplace and whittling on a match stem.

"There's one thing for certain," Bert Woodford said. "Kelton is stepping things up. He wanted to slaughter us wholesale up there; now that we shot our way out of that trap, he's naturally going to have to pick up speed until we have a showdown. We might just as well face the fact."

Laney said, "That's a fact. And since we've got to have a showdown fight, it seems like the only sensible thing to do is to get everybody we can get together, and go and comb him and his men out of those mountains once for all. There won't be any end of the trouble until we do."

Shorty looked uncomfortable. "I'd wait a while to talk over a proposition like that," he offered.

His being practically a stranger, they all looked at him, waiting an explanation of why he offered his

advice. Shorty gave none, but uncomfortably gave his attention to rolling a cigarette.

THE DOCTOR'S buggy was rolling up to the door, and Doc came in, along with June Adair.

Doc Benson was short and wiry, a chirpy little man with a white goatee and small iron-rimmed glasses. He stood in the door with his bag in his hand and swept the room with his eyes. "What's the matter with you jiggers?" he snapped. "Can't you do your squabbling closer to town, so me and my nurse don't have to traipse all over the country to take care of you?"

"Get yourself a drink in the kitchen," Old J. B. growled. "Then wash your hands and get to work on us; you probably haven't washed 'em since you delivered the last calf."

June Adair found that Bert had already put water on the stove to heat, and she and Doctor Benson got busy with the two men. They found that the wounds were superficial; Doc dropped ashes from his cigar on the men as he worked, and cussed them all.

"You ain't got no business playing with guns if you're gonna squirm every time a doctor touches you. June, did you ever see such a bunch of babies? Call yourselves men! Hunh!"

He prattled and talked, did an expert job of patching them up, and making them forget that he was hurting them while he was doing it. "I'm going to trade my old lady off and marry June," he announced. "Only decent nurse I've ever had to help me since I started practicing forty years ago."

"But you've only been treating humans for ten years," Laney answered. "I noticed you took your diploma off the wall when you changed your doctoring from horses to people. It was from a veterinary's school; saw it myself."

"Listen, button," Benson said. "If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have been alive today. You was born dead. I took one look at you and advised your pa strongly against trying to save you. You'd still have been dead if your old man hadn't put a gun in my ribs and made me blow the breath of life into your lungs. And many's the time after that, he told me that seeing what a mistake he'd made was the reason why he never wore a gun again."

SHORTY WAS still squatting on his heels in front of the fireplace. He had been subdued ever since the group had looked queerly at him for giving them some unasked advice. Now he looked up speculatively at the doctor, who was pulling down his shirt sleeves. "Doc, just how long can a cow give milk?"

It seemed a crazy question to be coming at a time like this, and the rest of them followed Doctor Benson in looking at him queerly. "How do I know?" Benson snapped. "I don't know anything about cows. Ask some of these experts."

Laney, from his couch, chuckled. "Don't let him fool you, Shorty; he's a graduate verterinarian."

"I'm not joking," Shorty said seriously.

"I reckon," Benson answered disgustedly, "that she can give milk till she dries up; is that the answer you wanted?"

They all laughed, but Shorty persisted. "How long could she give milk if she wanted to?"

"Until the calf quit nursing, I reckon," Benson answered. "These hombres are supposed to be cattlemen. Ask them."

"I'm supposed to be a cattleman myself, but when I come to think about it, I don't know. I never figured whether a cow could keep on giving milk if she wanted to after she weaned her calf."

"But she can't; weaning dries them up."

"Suppose she didn't wean her calf. How long could that calf keep nursing. A year, maybe?"

Loving an argument as all cow people do, everybody was listening. Besides, there was something serious about the way Shorty pursued a subject, which appeared on the surface to be the type of thing men

would enjoy chewing on around a bunkhouse on a long winter night.

"I haven't got the least idea," Benson said. "People like this bunch have always kept me too busy getting them out of the results of their damned foolishness for me to have time to think about things like that."

June Adair, who was not one to intrude on anybody's conversation, turned to Shorty and asked a question. "Didn't you ever milk a cow?"

Shorty looked at her in offended dignity. "Listen, lady. I might have stole a calf from a full grown cow that could protect herself, but I ain't never been guilty of stealing the food right out of a helpless little calf's mouth. Do I look so plumb ornery?"

"You seemed to want an answer to your question," she said. "I'm not the expert on cows that you people here are, but I thought I might be able to throw some light on the problem that seems to be worrying you."

"If you can, then you are a better cattleman than any of the gents here seem to be," Shorty grinned. "How long, Miss Adair, can a cow give milk if she really sets her mind to it?"

"Back in Illinois," June answered, "we lived in the edge of a small town, and we kept a cow. My father got the beef we could eat in payment of doctor bills from the country people, so we had no need for a calf. We had a shorthorn cow that we used to milk—robbing an innocent calf of his dinner, if you like to call it that. At any rate, after that cow became fresh the first time, we milked her every day for seven years without her drying up, or having any calves in the meantime. And I know of other farmers who would milk their cows year after year without letting them dry up and freshen again. Does that answer your question?"

Shorty grinned and got to his feet, clicking his knife shut on his leg. "It shore does, lady. I been wondering how this Kelton was keeping all of them whiteface calves on them cows of his all along without them cows having new calves of their own now and then. I couldn't figue no profit in it for him that way. But if he could keep a continuous string of calves nursing them cows six months at a time year after year, then he could certainly make a lot of money out of them milk factories. That's shore a relief, Miss Adair. And to think I came to a country where it takes a schoolteacher from Illinois to answer a simple question about cows. Well, thanks, anyway."

13

SHORTY'S managing to dig out the answer to the foster-mother cows set the men in the room to talking among themselves, and Shorty was out of the conversation again for a moment.

He put his knife in his pocket, and now his face was dead serious. He hitched up his belt and stepped across the room to Luther Cole. "Got a match?" he asked, holding up an unlighted cigarette.

Cole fished a match out of his vest pocket and handed it to him, looking puzzled at the half dozen matches Shorty had stuck in his hat band.

Shorty said in a low voice, "Step out here with me a minute, will you Cole. I want a word with you."

The two men went out the door and walked down toward the horse lot. Ballinger had long known Shorty, and he read in the little man's face that there was something serious on his mind. Shorty's casual attitude had left him now.

Doctor Benson had finished putting his instruments into his bag, and he turned to Jim. "That friend of yours. He's a funny little duck, ain't he? Chewed on that idea like a bulldog, and be damned if he didn't get something out of it. Not as simple as he looks."

"He's fooled a lot of people with that blank look of his," Ballinger said. "He's—"

Two sharp pistol shots sang out outdoors, cutting the conversation off in the middle of words. Chairs clicked to the floor and the men moved to the door and out onto the porch.

Out by the horse lot, Shorty stood over the outstretched body of Luther Cole. He stood looking down on the man for a moment, while the crowd on the porch stood frozen in surprise. Then he opened the cylinder of his pistol, threw away his spent shell and reloaded. He walked back to the house and stopped at the porch, facing Luther Cole's friends; his homely and usually friendly face was taut and watchful as he noted the men in front of him.

These men were Luther Cole's neighbors, and feelings run strong in times of trouble. Shorty saw the restrained suspicion and anger in their faces as they awaited his explanation of the killing.

Shorty threw a quick glance at Ballinger, and Ballinger stepped off the porch and moved beside him. It was a small gesture, but it told them one thing. Shorty would have his hearing.

"Trouble with Cole?" Jim asked, giving his friend a lead.

Shorty looked at the ground, and then up at the men standing on the porch. "Gents," he said. "You thought I was out of turn a while ago when I advised you not to be in too big a hurry planning your next step. I said that because I hadn't told you everything I ran into up in the mountains. I was holding back some of it."

Doc Benson had gone out and examined Cole; now he came back and said, "He's dead."

SHORTY answered, "Yeah," then returned to his subject. "You see, I spent one night up at Jake's Place in Pinetop. Jake put me in an empty room right at the front of the building. I'm not the man that likes to have a man like Jake plant me in a certain spot where his friends can find me, so I took the liberty of moving myself after dark to one of the rear rooms. I was just getting as comfortable as I could in what Jake calls a bed when I learned that I was to have neighbors in the next room. Some men came in, and they had a bottle and a lot to say. I'm a man that likes to stick my nose into other people's business, so I discovered that there was a knot-hole in the wall between the rooms, and I took the liberty of looking through that knot-hole. I saw the gentlemen and heard them talking.

"Now the subject of the conversation I eavesdropped on interested me considerable, since it concerned Jim, here, and I work for Jim. The sense of that talk was that there was to be a little party arranged, and Jim and you gents were to be the guests of honor. Well, you gents were Byrd Kelton's guests last night. I would have tipped you off; but I couldn't because some of Kelton's men, who were also guests at Jake's hostelry that evening, accidentally took a liking to my horse, and left me afoot."

"Man!" Ballinger exclaimed, "can't you ever keep a horse more than an hour or so?"

"Anyhow," Shorty continued snubbing Jim, "I couldn't find another horse in time to get down to warn you that Kelton had built a trap for you."

"It couldn't have been Kelton," Bert Woodford said. "It must have been one of his men. Kelton is wounded, and is down around Durant or somewhere getting treated. Luther Cole learned that from one of Kelton's men at Pinetop."

"Luther *told* you he learned that, but it wasn't so," Shorty answered evenly. "I saw those men arrange that party. I know Byrd Kelton; he was one of the men I saw arranging the party and he is not wounded. As a matter of fact, he paid quite a nice little handful of gold to the man who staged it for him."

"Who was the other man?" Bert Woodford asked, and a deep silence fell over them all.

"I had never seen him before up to that time," Shorty said, "so I didn't know his name then. But that's him, lying out there by the horse lot. Luther Cole, you call him; I wouldn't be surprised if you was to find a pocket full of fifty-dollar gold pieces on him."

A stunned silence settled over Ballinger and young Woodford and the riders gathered with him. It hit young Woodford particularly hard because he had disliked the man, and for that reason wanted to be more than fair to him.

"That's a pretty strong charge," Bert said. "And you shot him down without our getting to hear his side of it. Don't you think—"

"I gave him his chance," Shorty said. "I had my reasons for not telling you before him. You know he led you into a trap, but you only have my word that it was not one of Kelton's men, but Kelton himself, that he talked to at Jake's.

"I knew that you'd want to be fair with him, since he was your neighbor. It would be hard for any of you to draw a gun on a man you'd lived close to and trusted; he could have talked you out of it. But I'm a stranger here. I'm Jim Ballinger's friend, and his fight is my fight. This Cole was selling him out. I saw it with my own eyes. I didn't have to lean over backwards to be fair to him after that. He had led Jim into a trap that I couldn't prevent, and if you men had gone on with your plans in his presence, he would have led you into another one. I'm working for Jim Ballinger, and it is my job to handle his enemies. Cole was his enemy.

"I gave Cole his chance. I called him out there by the lot and told him what I had seen. I gave him his chance to draw, and he went for his gun. You heard two shots. The first one was his; the second one mine. That's it, gentlemen."

A COUPLE of the boys went down to Cole's body and went through his pockets. One of them came back with a chamoise pouch, and emptied a handful of clinking gold pieces into his hand while the men on the porch watched in grim silence. He poured the money back into the bag and tightened the string.

"What'll I do with it?" he asked.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Ballinger said, "It probably came out of all our pockets. I'll give it to Miss Adair for the school fund. It's tainted money, but maybe that'll take the curse off it."

The fact of Cole's treachery spread a pall of silence over the party; they milled about the place like a bed of ants whose nest had been disturbed. Nobody felt like talking, yet everybody was thinking the same thing. Kelton had reached the point where he had tried to massacre them all; he thought he was strong enough to take over things; he was buying valley men to use against their neighbors. Nobody was safe.

Finally Ballinger called Shorty out into the yard, and they sat on a bench under the big sycamore tree. "You've been to Kelton's," he said. "Could you lead a bunch of us to his ranch?"

Shorty caught him up short. "It's not just a ranch; it's a whole settlement. I reckon there are a dozen or so log houses, and even a little store with groceries and liquor. They've got a few women up there with them. Kelton's got a woman keeping house for him, and a bunch of girls come and go between his place and Pinetop. They've got practically an army there; Pinetop is their outpost."

"I can't help that," Ballinger said. "The time is here; we've got to make our play against him, even if we have to clean out Pinetop, too. Could you get a bunch of us to his place traveling in the dark?"

"In the daytime, yes. In the dark —well, if we could get close enough during the day, I could get us the rest of the way. But that's a tangled mess of rocks up there, and I don't believe you could even get

in. I didn't have a chance to tell you the setup he's got."

"What's it like?"

"His place is in a little clearing—something like a deep sharp-sided round cake pan. It's got a narrow entrance to it that passes through some cliffs, and Kelton usually keeps that passage guarded. An army trying to pass through there could be shot down by a few men hiding behind them rocks. I'd say it was what you'd call practically impregnable."

"How'd you get out when they chased you?"

"Oh, that? I came out through a narrow trail over to the left of the place—the one that leads on toward them hidden valleys."

"Then why couldn't we go in that way?"

"You could, but it's a long way around, and that trail is so narrow that you'd have to take your men in one at a time. If they was to get you trapped there, you'd lose every man you've got."

"Then that's the way we will go in," Ballinger said, getting to his feet. "We've got to go after Kelton if we're ever going to stop him; there's no use trying to catch him when he's after us. Do you realize that there aren't half a dozen of us that ever laid eyes on the man?"

"You ain't missed nothing," Shorty said. "He's a little runt not much bigger than I am; he wouldn't weigh a hundred and forty pounds with a pocket full of rocks. He's got a narrow hatchet face, with eyes too close together, and the coldest mouth I ever seen on anything except a catfish. And he's got that whole passel of big lunkers afraid of him. You know, Jim, there's men that somehow just manage to incorporate more evil in them than half a dozen ordinary mean men. Well, Kelton's like that, from what I could make out. He's just plain cruel. I heard that one of them mountain men got to messing around with his gal. He laid a gun on the man and made a couple of other fellows roll him up tight in barbed wire and leave him outdoors one zero night last winter to freeze to death, as a warning to the others. The man ain't human."

"Human or not, we're not waiting any longer. You stick around, because you've got to lead us into that skunk's nest."

BALLINGER found young Woodford. Bert had a couple of his hands, and they were taking the body of Luther Cole to a wagon and loading him into it, along with picks and shovels.

"I won't have him buried on our place," Bert said tightly. "A skunk like that doesn't deserve a decent burial. I'll take him down the road somewhere and plant him, and I won't leave a marker on his grave. The quicker he's forgotten the better for everybody."

"Listen, Bert," Ballinger said. "When you get through with that job, I've got another one for you. And you've got to be very careful about it. It's time to go after Kelton."

"What I've been saying a long time," Bert answered.

"We've tried to do what we could do without risking the lives of decent men needlessly. But that won't get us anywhere any more. It's get Kelton or he'll get us; there'll be no peace or safety for any of us until we get this business settled."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm going to give you a list of names of men out here on the range. I'll round up other men in town. I don't want you to tell anybody about the others, but I want you to see each one separately, and tell him to meet at Pinetop at twelve noon sharp tomorrow. And tell each man to bring any of his own trusted friends that is willing to take on a risky job. But don't tell them what we're going to do, and don't tell any of them that you're also telling others. I want each man to think that he and his friends are the only ones I want to see."

"What's the idea of that?"

"I don't want this plan to leak out. It could get around that we're

organizing a big force; if Kelton learned about it, he'd either gather up an army of his own, or take out and hide. I don't want either to happen. I want to take a bunch of men and surprise him. They'll learn what's up when they get to Pinetop. You notify these men, then come home and get yourself some rest. You'll need it tomorrow."

●

Ballinger found June Adair in the Woodford kitchen and tossed the bag on the table. "Here's some money for your school," he said. "It came out of Kelton's pocket, which means that it originally came out of ours. Take it and use it where it will do the most good."

She poured the money out on the kitchen table, and looked her question at Ballinger.

He said, "Take it and don't ask any questions; you can be sure the school kids are entitled to it."

She put the money back in the bag, and asked, "Cup of coffee?"

"I could use it," he answered, and sat down at the table while she brought the cup.

"You could also use a shave and some sleep."

Jim stirred his coffee and studied her wonderingly. Her experience in the cave seemed to have humanized her. She had always been a remote kind of woman—friendly but very impersonal—and now this unthawing had him puzzled. It pleased him somehow, for she was even more attractive now that her reserve seemed to have melted away.

It pleased Ballinger, and yet it saddened him. Knowing as he did from her own lips that June regarded this country and all the people in it as completely lawless—that she disapproved of their whole philosophy of life—the sadness came from his knowledge that she would never consider marrying him and becoming a part of it.

June took a cup of coffee for herself and sat down across the table from him. "What are you going to do next?"

He did not want to tell her the whole truth, but he had to answer her question. "Why, we're going to look around and see if we can lay hands on Kelton. But not before tomorrow."

"That means more fight, doesn't it?" she asked.

"It could. If we run into him. But it can't be helped."

Her answer surprised him. "I know it can't."

"I understood that you thought it could," he said, showing his puzzlement.

"That was before," she paused—"before the other day. I have changed my mind about a lot of things, Jim."

Her voice was soft, and the look that she gave him was much more personal than the things she said.

"Well, it's still a rough country," he answered. "And it might be a little rougher for a while. How bad hurt are Woodford and Laney? Are they able to get around?"

"They're not in bad shape at all."

"That's good," he answered. "In that case, I want to take you to town some time during the day. You had better stay there for a while. Go to Doc's, I suppose."

"Why, Jim? This is my home."

"Just as a precautionary measure. We're going to look for Kelton and it wouldn't do to have you out here unprotected. Kelton is a mad dog, and there's no telling what ideas he might get into his head when the trouble gets to boiling."

She was thoughtful for a long moment. "Jim, won't this trouble ever be over? Can't a person live in peace in his own home?"

"Yes. But only when we destroy Kelton or he destroys us; not before. So we're going to settle it one way or another right now."

14

BALLINGER took June to town in the buckboard late in the afternoon, Shorty going horseback and leading Ballinger's saddled horse. Jim left June at Doctor Benson's and went

out onto the street. His left arm was still in a blue bandanna sling, but he was feeling stronger now. And there was much to do.

He went out into the street and walked up toward LaBosket's store, noting that there were many strangers in town. He knew the mark of them; mountain men sent down by Kelton to scatter and hover about—or for some specific errand. Knowing that Kelton wanted his scalp, Ballinger was conscious of the personal danger these men offered him.

Here and there along the street a couple of them sat on a bench in front of a store, their guns conspicuous, their hands and eyes apparently idle. Waiting vultures; keeping an eye on a town that was likely to die.

A youngish, red-headed man and a tall man with narrow stooped shoulders and a rat face were lounging at the entrance of LaBosket's, standing and talking in front of the door.

Ballinger saw them brush him with a glance as he came up, then ignore him, not moving aside as he approached the door. He stopped still a moment, realizing that this little thing could be a trap. Then recognition came to him. This tall man with the stoop and the loose-hanging guns and spotted calfskin vest was one of those who had chased Jim and Shorty down out of the mountains. The man was certain to have recognized him, for he was the one who had put the shot in Jim's shoulder.

Ballinger's common sense told him that this *was* a trap, that he should avoid it. But anger at the man who had shot him welled up in him; he did not have it in him to back down now. He had to move that man and go in the door, if it disrupted the whole plan he had in mind.

"I'd like to get into that store, Slim," he said quietly. "Any objections?"

The lean man studied him insolently. "None whatever; help yourself."

"Then how about stepping aside? You're in my way."

"Now that's another matter, friend. This is a free sidwalk. I'll keep right on standing where it suits me. That is, if you don't mind, of course."

Ballinger showed him the raw edges of his temper. "I do mind; I told you to move aside."

"Maybe you'd like to move me."

"I can do it," Ballinger snapped. "Move!"

He saw that the stooped man was drunk, and that this situation held the powder to blow things up before he was ready. But Jim could not back down now. He started to walk around the man, and saw the corners of the man's mouth crack in a smile. Then his gun was in the man's ribs. "Slim, I said for you to move away from that door. Or do you want me to blast you out of the way?"

The red-headed man was chewing gum and leaning against the store front. Now he straightened up, caught the tall one by the arm and pulled him aside. He had a grin on his face. "Let the man get by, Slim," he said. "He wants to get into that store real bad."

BALLINGER swung the door open, walked into the store, and saw LaBosket standing behind the drygoods counter lowering a rifle that had been at his shoulder.

"What's all the excitement?" Ballinger asked.

"You damned fool," LaBosket answered. "You want to get yourself killed? There's a dozen of them in town, mean as scorpions. You're just begging to get killed. Keep out of sight, can't you?"

"That's been the trouble with us," Ballinger said; "we've tried to keep the peace too long. And the more we stick our tails between our legs and run for the barn, the bolder they get. This is the end of it. I came in here to tell you something; I'm going to sweep the Jackforks clean of Byrd Kelton and his gang if I have to do it single-handed. But I'd rather have you and a few oth-

ers here in town with me. Here's a list of names of men I want you to line up for me. Noon tomorrow at Pinetop. But try to keep it quiet."

LaBosket thought this over. He had been appointed sheriff to succeed the murdered Costigan, but did not particularly care for that kind of work. He was glad that Ballinger was taking the lead in the matter. LaBosket was not afraid, but he was a businessman; he preferred to run his business. "All right," he said. "If it's got to be done, I guess the sooner the better."

"I'll line up Malone. I think he'll get a pleasure out of the trip."

"Don't go down to his place," LaBosket said quickly. "These wild ones are hanging around there thick as flies. I've been watching them coming and going."

"Malone's a good man to have along," Ballinger answered. "And besides, I'm in no mood to walk softly around those hedgehogs."

They were standing just inside LaBosket's show window, and both men saw the red-head and the slender man push Malone's swing doors inward and go into the saloon.

"See?" LaBosket said. "They own the town. They're looking for trouble—particularly with you. Kelton's probably sent them in after your scalp."

"I thought so at first," Ballinger replied. "But something funny happened. Why did that red-head ease that slim hombre out of it when they had me set up for a shooting match?"

"The slim man is drinking; maybe the red-head figured that they couldn't finish what they started. You've got a rep, Jim. Even with one arm tied up, the woods is not full of men who'd like to face you with a gun."

"That doesn't sound like the answer to me," Ballinger argued. "This is what's sticking in my craw: Kelton knows things are coming to a head. I believe those hombres are in here to keep an eye peeled for any sign that we're organizing to move against them. I don't think he wants his showdown here; he wants to maneuver the whole crowd of us into something and pour it on us—teach the whole country a lesson about bucking him. Killing one man like me won't make a big enough showing."

"Then you ought to be careful in trying to organize. There might be leaks."

Ballinger slapped the wall with an impatient gesture. "Leak or not. I'm moving against him. I'll see you."

"Don't be a fool! Stay away from Malone's."

"I'm going to Malone's," Ballinger answered, and went out the door and down the street.

HE SAW three men with the mountain stamp on them watching him as he came toward them. Two were sitting on the bench in front of the saddle shop, and the third was leaning against the awning post, across the walk from them, talking to them. Jim would have to walk through these men—or turn aside.

He walked through them; he went toward them without breaking his stride. He gave each a straight look and got an insolent, knowing half-smile in return. He passed on through them, and his back felt as big as a barn door, but he did not turn and look behind him. He went on down the street a few paces and cut across, going into Malone's through the swing doors, and standing just inside while his eyes adjusted to the light.

Jim brushed the room with a glance, and saw a tight situation.

Shorty was at the end of the bar to his left; at the right end, where it bent around to the rear wall, there were five men standing so that they were facing Shorty. Shorty had his back to the left hand wall so that he in turn was facing them while he was working on the second of three beers set out before him.

Pat Malone was leaning against the back bar, his hair plastered down, a big cigar in his red face, and a white apron around his waist. He had one foot cocked up on the

washbasin before him, and his arms were crossed over his blue serge vest.

Ballinger could feel the tension in the place; the very silence with which the mountain men attended to their drinking, the bland, half-smiling look with which Shorty attended to his three beers.

Remembering Pat Malone's lecture on the art of wearing a shoulder-holstered weapon, the saloonman's crossed arms over his vest had a meaning to Ballinger. He judged that Malone's right hand must right now be touching the handle of his concealed weapon. *Something to that idea of his,* Ballinger thought.

He went toward Shorty, and the little man greeted him with an amused grin. Ballinger sensed that there was also a touch of relief in it which the little man was trying to conceal. "Have a beer, Jim," he grinned. "Hot in here right now."

Malone straightened up and drew the beer, setting it before Jim without so much as a knowing look. He took it easy with the glass, knowing that Jim had sized up the play and was covering him. He set the glass before Jim and backed up against the backbar again, taking up his previous stance.

Jim let his eyes run down the counter and sweep over the men gathered there. He caught the glance of the young red-head, and saw a faintly humorous smile crack the not-unpleasant face. He looked on to the tall man and saw that man's hatchet-harrow face darken, and the black eyes shine with malevolence. "I see we've got guests in town," Ballinger said casually to Malone. "Ought to show our hospitality. See what they're drinking, Pat."

Malone's cigar came out of his mouth, and he started to speak. Then he put the cigar back in his mouth and walked down to the curved end of the bar. "Gent wants to treat," he said. "What'll it be?"

The hatchet faced one refused with an oath; four of the others followed his lead, but the red-head laughed. "Sure," he said. "Give me a double bourbon."

Malone tossed out a sparkling glass and poured it full, then recorked the bottle and set it on the backbar. Then he walked down toward Shorty's end and backed up against the wall, facing the men.

Red picked up his glass and held it up to the light, twirling it and looking through it. "Nice bead," he said. He passed it under his nose, taking a couple of whiffs. "Not bad stuff. Not bad at all." Then he raised his eyes to Ballinger, lifted his glass and nodded. "Here is to your health, sir. May your days be many and filled with peace."

Ballinger lifted his beer, and they both were drinking when the tall man slapped the bar angrily. "What the hell is this?" he growled, and slid away from the others, reaching for his gun. "That hombre's not making a fool out of me."

THE MAN was fast; his gun was coming up out of its holster as he was speaking. Red yelled at him. Ballinger was caught with his beer glass in his right hand as the man lifted his weapon.

The beer glass was still in Ballinger's right hand, but an explosion came from within the blue bandanna sling holding his left hand. The impact of his bullet sent the slender man against a table as his weapon barked, and he rolled to the floor. Red was on the man, placing his foot on the fallen gunman's wrist so that he could not raise it.

Ballinger still stood with his beer glass in his right hand.

The smoke from the weapon he had fired with the left hand, curled out of the bandanna sling which concealed his hand and gun.

Shorty had his back against the wall, both his guns out and covering the four men still standing at the bar. Pat Malone had suddenly blossomed out with his gold-plated masterpiece, which he now had covering the red-head, who had kicked the gun out of the fallen drunk's hand and now turned and faced Ballinger.

Shorty had a blank look on his face as his eyes were riveted on the

blue bandanna in which Ballinger's left hand hung. And Malone's face had lost its bored look as he watched the smoke curl out of the bandana. "Well, I'll be double-dogged damned," Shorty exclaimed. "We live and learn, don't we Pat?"

Ballinger was watching the red-head. The man stood between them and the slender man, who was now getting awkwardly to his feet. The red-head's smile was infectious, even though there was a malicious mischief behind it. "That'll be all from Slim, gents," he said; "I'll guarantee that. He's drunk."

Neither Ballinger nor Malone were inclined to even answer the man with the red-hair and the sharp green eyes. Shorty kept his gun on the crowd, but he answered the man. "You're keeping bad company, Red; you can't do yourself any good hanging out with that tribe."

"I rode in with 'em,'" Red grinned, "and I generally ride out with the bunch I ride in with."

"That kind of loyalty don't pay off in the Jackforks," Shorty said.

"It's the only kind I know," Red answered.

"That's a shame," Shorty said. "There must be a lot of fine strapping ladies that would take to you if you was in circulation. You're missing a lot up in them hills."

"Oh, I don't know," Red answered. "With your eyes closed, one girl is about the same as another; you worrying about my love life?"

"I was just happening to remember, I was down in Sonora, Mexico, not long ago. Never saw the like of pretty women, and those Mexican gals will fight over a man with red hair. Just happened to think of it."

"I'll bear it in mind," Red answered. "After I get through here, I'll think it over."

"A lot of things could come up before you made up your mind," Shorty answered. "Anyhow, I was just trying to help out those Mexican girls."

"Sure, thanks." Red turned to the tall man who had dropped into one of the chairs at the table beside him. "All right, Slim, we're getting out of here. I'm riding herd on you; make one more break like that without me telling you to, and I'm going to work you over myself. Get out, Slim. Come on, boys; we've got two more gin mills to cover yet."

He turned and there was a spark of humor in his eyes as he looked at Ballinger. "Thanks for the drink, friend; I'll see you around, I'm sure."

"Yeah. You might," Ballinger answered, and watched Red herd the men out of the place.

WHEN THE doors had swung behind the Kelton men, Shorty whistled. "I ain't ordinarily glad to see a man that ordinarily means trouble," he said. "But for once I'm kind of glad you dropped in when you did. When did you start carrying concealed weapons?"

"It was LaBosket's idea," Ballinger admitted. "The street looks hostile, and he had the idea that those boys were under orders to put their brand on me. I don't feel any too good about carrying a hidden gun, but under the circumstances, I don't reckon I could be accused of taking unfair advantage of Slim."

"Nope," Malone answered. "He tried to shoot you while you had your beer glass in your gun hand. I've been looking for that bunch to start smoking things up ever since they've been in town. Can't understand their behaving themselves. Most of them are just milling around and keeping quiet; the slim one is the only one I've seen drunk."

"Shorty, didn't you tell me that one of Kelton's men was a red-head that you knew from before?"

"Yeah, that was him; but that wasn't what kept him from starting trouble. He's working for Kelton, and he'll go along with whatever Kelton says do. I can't figure it, myself."

"It can only mean one thing," Ballinger said. "And I've had that in mind ever since they passed up a chance to whipsaw me a few minutes ago. If Kelton had sent them to town to get me or you, they'd

have given it a try. They know Kelton wants our scalps, therefore, they must have been under orders to stick around, but not to start trouble. Why?"

"Because he's got something else in mind," Shorty said. "But what?"

Ballinger then told Malone what he had in mind. "I'm going to move against them on their own grounds at noon tomorrow. If you want to go along, here's a little list of men I'd like you to bring along with you, Malone. You might get another chance to drain off a little more of the liquor those boys drank up on you."

"It would be a pleasure," Malone answered, looking at the list of men that Ballinger handed him. "A man gets soft staying cooped up in a store all day. Needs to get out and exercise a little."

"Dodging bullets is good for speeding up a man's reflexes," Shorty grinned at him. "Does him a world of good."

"But what?" Malone asked, "are them bums doing hanging around town peaceably? I don't like it; when they're behaving themselves, it don't speak well for what they're up to."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Ballinger answered. "Just don't let Shorty drink up all your beer. And don't believe anything he says."

"I never believe anything I hear, and only half of what I see," Malon answered. "Like these mountain men; I see 'em behaving themselves, but I don't believe it. Wonder what?"

BALLINGER was already on his way out. He was also wondering, but he had other things to do. He spent the rest of the afternoon here and there in town, moving about in an idle manner so as not to indicate any urgency, but seeing and talking to men that he invited to join him. He got back to LaBosket's store at about six o'clock.

LaBosket hurried his last customer out, then followed Ballinger back to the rear of the store. LaBosket seemed filled with repressed excitement. "What happened to you?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Why?"

"Who shot you?"

"Nobody. I shot that tall man's gun out of his hand. Why?"

"Where's June? She was supposed to be with you."

"No, she wasn't. I left her at Doc's just after noon."

"But later. You sent somebody to get her, didn't you?"

"No." Ballinger felt a fear rising in him. "What are you talking about? Tell me, man."

"Why, Doc's wife was in about an hour ago, and she said that somebody came to her house a little before that and told June that you'd been shot, and wanted her to come. Doc's out in the country delivering a baby. June went with the man. You didn't send for her?"

Ballinger felt a great weakening anger overpowering him. "Hell, no! You know—I'll bet you—"

"Sure," LaBosket interrupted with growing excitement. "Kelton knows that the whole country worships her. He could use her for a hostage—Hey, wait."

Ballinger was already headed toward the door. LaBosket followed him out, closing the door but not taking time to lock it. "That dirty so-and-so," the old storekeeper fumed. "If he harms her, I'll take my own two hands and strangle the life out of him..."

He was trying to keep up with Ballinger's fast stride.

"Never mind," Ballinger said. "I'll take care of him personally."

15

AT DOCTOR Benson's, Ballinger verified the things that LaBosket had told him. And Mrs. Benson, learning the significance of June's disappearance, almost broke down, strong woman that she was.

"That fiend," she said; "if I could only get my hands on him."

"That's the way we all feel, Judith," LaBosket said. "But try to keep from worrying. We're going to put an end to this matter once for all."

"I hope you kill every one of those crooks," the old woman said vehemently. "And make this country fit to live in again."

Ballinger's impatience made him irritable. "Come on. Let's get going."

"Where are you going to start? You know Kelton wouldn't stay here in town with her."

"No, he wouldn't. But I want a bunch of men to round up every one of those Kelton men who've been loitering on the streets. You see, now, why they were here; they were to cover Kelton while he got his hands on June. If anything happened, they were to go into action. I want every one of those men hauled in and put over the coals."

"I doubt if Kelton would tell them much more than what they were to do; he wouldn't have told them he was going to kidnap a woman."

"I don't know. You're right about Kelton's getting her out of town, I suppose, but we've got to move and we had better start here. Round me up some men, will you, while I go find Shorty?"

"I'll try."

Ballinger found Shorty in a domino game with Malone at the latter's saloon, and told both the news. Malone said, "Well!" then got up and took his apron off, and went about the place blowing out the lights.

Shorty became dead serious. "They wouldn't leave her in town," he reasoned. "And them mountains is big. Only thing I see, is to round up any Kelton men we can find if they're still around, and sweat some information out of them. So that's what they were here for, to back up that kind of a play."

Malone had put on a new derby hat; now he left his vest off, exposing the gun under his left armpit. He went behind the bar and brought out a sawed-off shotgun, and stuffed his pants pockets full of shells out of a bar drawer. It was the first time that Ballinger had ever seen Malone so mad that he was speechless.

"Some of those Kelton men were hanging out down at Dowdey's Bar," Shorty said. "Guess that's as good as any to start with."

Malone blew out his last light, locked his door, and the three of them started down the sidewalk.

Ballinger laid a hand on Shorty's arm suddenly and said, "Hold it."

A horseman had turned out of the livery stable and broke his animal into a loping run in their direction.

"We'll look him over," Ballinger said, and stepped out into the street, followed by Shorty and Malone.

They spread out across the street with their guns drawn. Malone had the short shotgun up to his shoulder.

The horseman saw them and pulled up. "What the hell is this?" he demanded as the three converged on him.

Shorty stepped up to the man's side, holding his gun high, and lifted the man's Colt out of its holster. "I told you a while ago, Red, that there were a lot of girls down in Mexico just pining for you; you shouldn't have kept them waiting. Get down."

RED SLID off his horse, then lifted his hands up. He did not seem to be frightened as they searched him for a concealed gun. "Well, what?" he asked. "You find any stolen cows in my pockets?"

Ballinger said, "We're going to have a little talk with you, and you'd better take it damned seriously from the first. Just step over here back of the livery stable with us."

"Oh, a hanging, eh?" Red answered evenly. "Well, I don't suppose it would do you any good for me to tell you that I never stole one of your calves, and that I was just getting ready to take Shorty's advice."

"That's not what we want to

hear," Ballinger answered. "Just step along."

"I tell you, I was just heading out of the country."

"A little late," Shorty observed. "You gave me a tip up at Kelton's, and I acted on it and saved my skin. I was paying you back a favor; you should have acted on it."

Red shrugged and turned. "I've been too late about seeing a lot of things," he said. "I suppose it doesn't matter now. You guys want to plug me, why don't you do it here and now. What's the idea of sneaking around back of the livery stable? Afraid somebody will see you shooting down an unarmed man?"

"Keep moving," Ballinger said, curbing a desire to grab the man by the collar right here. "Turn that way, back of the barn."

In the darkness back of the livery barn, Ballinger handed his pistol over to Shorty. "Keep the man covered," he said. "I'm going to make him talk if I have to tear him into dog meat."

Red kept a calm front. "Let me tell *you* something," he said. "You've decided to give me a working over without telling me what you're doing it for. I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not afraid of dying if you take a notion to gun me down; but I thought maybe you'd like to tell me what you're trying to find out. Maybe I'd be willing to answer your questions. Who knows?"

"You'll answer them," Ballinger said, balling up his fists. "Kelton sent you boys into town to cover him while he was abducting the schoolteacher. That's the last straw. It happens that there's not a man outside of your scummy bunch that won't take a pleasure in killing every mountain man he can get in his gunsights because of that. We're going to find Miss Adair, and we're going to kill every longrider that stands between us and her. Now, you can start talking, or I'm going to start the killing with you."

Red was silent a moment, then he said, "You might not believe this, because you'll think I'm just talking to save my own hide, but here's a fact. Kelton sent us in, all right. We was to just hang around and see that there wasn't any suspicious movement among the people in town. The idea was that all you people would be keeping an eye on us. He said he had other business to do while we were being watched, but he didn't say what it was; he's a close-mouthed son, and he don't tell a man any more than he has to."

"So you didn't know he was kidnaping Miss Adair. Then how come you were getting out of town in such a hurry?"

"Because Kelton and I have done parted company. Like I told you, I didn't know what he was up to until he sent for me after he'd taken the girl. He thought too much of his own hide to take the chance on carrying her up into the mountains himself, so me and Slim and a couple more of those hombres I was with, met him at the edge of town and was to escort her up there and leave her—"

"Up where?" Ballinger snapped.

"Up to Jake's at Pinetop. When I saw what the job was, I balked and we had some words. This was out in the edge of town in the dark. When I balked at the job, he went for his gun, and I went for mine. I was a little slow I guess, because the next thing I knew I was lying in the weeds with my head feeling like I had been kicked by a mule. The rest of them were gone. I reckon Kelton figured he had shot me dead."

RED RAN his fingers along his head. "Well, I sat there in them broomweeds and counted up my assets and liabilities. I've been a drifter, I reckon, always looking for a good time and a lot of excitement. I've done my share of fighting and drinking; I reckon I've deprived a calf or two of its mother, and I also ain't tried to protect myself any too hard when a good looking woman tried to rope me in. But I just happen to have a sister of my own, and when it comes to stealing a woman to hide behind her skirts—

well I figured I just wasn't in the market for that kind of stuff. Kelton knows a show-down is due, and he wanted that woman to use in bargaining with you if he had to—among other reasons. I'd got a pretty good look at Kelton and his whole bunch, and I decided that I didn't like the company I was keeping. So, I walked down to the water trough, washed up a little and caught my horse, and I was leaving this section without saying adios, goodbye or kiss my foot. That's my story, and if I'm a little late with it, that's my hard luck."

"So Kelton creased you and left you for dead, did he?"

"Yep. But he didn't kill me; he just woke me up."

"In that case," Ballinger said, "Kelton's bullet should have left its mark on you, don't you think?"

"Don't I think?" Red answered. "Friend, if you ask me, half my head was shot away."

"Turn your back to me," Ballinger said, striking a match.

When Red turned, Ballinger shoved the man's hat off and ran his fingers through the man's red hair. Red cringed; Ballinger's hand came away sticky with blood. "He's telling the truth—about the wound, anyway, Shorty."

"I've known Red a long time," Shorty said. "He was telling the truth about being wild, all right. Personally, I haven't known him to lie—except maybe to a pretty girl. I'm inclined to believe him, knowing him like I do. Anyway, it's the best bet we've got."

Ballinger thought it over. "You know him well enough to take responsibility for him if we give him a break?"

"I will if he'll give me his word," Shorty answered. "And if he's been lying, I'll be the first one to sink a slug into him."

"All right," Ballinger said with quick decision. "We've got to get moving. Red, you say you're off Kelton; will you pitch in with us?"

"The way you put it, I will," Red answered. "If you'd tried to bully me by giving me the alternative of working for you or being killed, you'd have had to kill me."

"If you put in with us, I'll expect you to be all the help you can, telling us what you know, and the like. You want to do it?"

"I never changed brands in the middle of a war yet," Red said. "But I don't consider that I'm changing brands now. Kelton shot me when I refused to do his dirty work; I reckon my conscience will be clear if I try to tag him for that. So, I'll check in with Shorty. Just say what you want."

"What do you think, Malone?"

The barkeep had been quietly listening all the while, and now he spoke for the first time. "Me, I'm a man that goes by first impression. I figured Red for just what he says he is, a wild young buck that just got into deeper water than he really wanted to swim in. I'll go along with it, and add my bullets to Shorty's if he's pulled a fast one on us."

"All right," Ballinger decided. "Got any idea, Red, just where Kelton will take her?"

"I'll give it all to you without your having to pump me," Red promised. "This is Saturday night, and there'll be the usual big doings at Pinetop. Some of the boys will be there. Kelton sometimes goes, and sometimes he doesn't. We were to take the girl to Jake's and guard her till he showed up. I suppose the other boys took her there."

"Then we might corner Kelton there," Ballinger surmised.

"There's no telling," Red answered. Having been accepted, he had dropped his defiant attitude, and was joining in with a whole heart. "Kelton has something up his sleeve, because he is only letting half the men go to Pinetop tonight. He's got a job for the rest of them, but I don't know what it is."

THE THOUGHT hit Ballinger like a sledge hammer, and it was born whole. "Kelton's a shrewd hombre. This is what he is thinking: by kidnaping June Adair, he knows that he will draw every man out of

town and off the range. He knows that we'll head for Pinetop, so half his men will be there to give us a fight. And while they've got us busy, Kelton could take the rest of his men and sweep the lower ranges clean of cattle. He knows this thing has come to a head, and that could be his big play."

Shorty whistled. "Sure," he answered. "He's built up a foolproof strategy."

"Come on," Ballinger said. "Right or wrong, we're going to play it that way."

They found LaBosket out on the street with about a dozen armed men of the town. The saddlemaker and his son, the liveryman, Joe Drake, who ran the feed store, and a few more had got their horses and joined the party.

Ballinger told LaBosket the things he had learned from Red, and his interpretation of them. There were those in the group who set little store by the word of a man who had ridden with Kelton, but on the strength of Shorty's faith in the man, Ballinger himself now guaranteed Red's conduct.

"Here's what we've got to do," Jim told LaBosket. "You deputize all of us. We'll take your bunch along with us and hit for Pinetop right now. We'll give them enough fight to make them think the whole bunch of us are there. In the meantime, you go out and get Bert Woodford to round up the men he had arranged to have join us later. There won't be too many of you, and you can't guard every man's herd separately without splitting your forces so badly that you couldn't do anything. So, you keep a man or two at each herd. Let them watch for Kelton's men to round up the cattle, but don't let them be disturbed. Wait till they round up all the herds into one bunch, then you've got Kelton's whole gang under your guns. They can't handle cattle and defend themselves all at once. I'd say stall along until daylight before hitting them, if you can manage it that way."

LaBosket thought this over a while, and the men with him had a few words to say, but in the end they agreed that it was their best chance.

"All right," LaBosket said. "Everybody got plenty of ammunition?"

They all went down to LaBosket's and loaded up with shells, and went out and mounted their horses.

"All right, LaBosket," Ballinger said. "Everybody stays with the job this time until it is settled once for all, if we have to burn those mountains down."

16

A HELLHOLE for hellbinders, Pinetop was in full swing at midnight when Ballinger and his group rode up to within a quarter of a mile of Jake's Place and concealed their horses in the brush off the road. A few minutes later, hidden in the trees across the road from Jake's, in the spot where Ballinger had stood only a few days before, they took the lay of the land as far as they could make it out in the dark.

Jake's store was lit up on the ground floor; there were lights coming from a few of the upstairs windows, where there were rows of single rooms along the two sides of a long hall running from the second-floor front porch to the outside stairway at the rear of the place. There were lights burning in two or three of the cabins which skirted the road to the right and left of Jake's.

Somebody was playing a fiddle and a guitar in Jake's, and the men in the shadows heard the stamp of feet in a square dance, and the raucus voice of the caller, and the shouts of men and of the women camp followers. It was a big night in the mountains.

Drake and the saddlemaker came back from a scouting trip up and

down the road. "We found about thirty saddled horses tied here and there, and we untied them and drove them off," Drake reported. "Must be quite an army here; what do we do?"

"We're going to smash this outlaw hangout for all time," Ballinger answered: "but I've got a job to do. Here's the way we work it: I want you men to start at the last shack down the road, and start burning them out. If there are any women in them, let them get their things and get out. If they've got any of Kelton's men with them, handle them the way you have to, but look out for yourselves first. I'd rather see every man in these mountains die than to see one decent man lose a drop of blood. Act on that."

"What are you going to be doing?"

"Kelton may have Miss Adair prisoner in one of Jake's rooms, and he may not. We've got to find out. I want you men to start firing those shacks, and see if you can draw the men out of Jake's. I'll take Shorty and go up the back stairs, and search every room up there. Once I know whether she's there or not, we'll give Jake's the works. He's the heart of this sore spot."

"Where do you want me to go?" Red asked.

Ballinger gave this some thought. "I couldn't ask you to turn your gun against the men you've ridden with," he said. "You just lay low. If we don't find Miss Adair and Kelton here, you can lead us to his hideout."

"All right," Red agreed. "But in the meantime, I'll try to make myself useful; I still owe brother Kelton a gun-lacing."

Ballinger and Shorty walked up the road a piece, cut across and came up behind Jake's building. A dim light shone out of the door at the top of the outdoor stairway, causing them to step back to the darkened corner of the building.

After a few moments they saw a dull glow a few hundred yards down the road, and presently a flame licked high above a cabin. A woman's yell drifted up in the night. A couple of shots rang out. Then a door screen screeched on its rusty hinges at the front of Jake's, and a loud voice yelled, "Fire down the road."

The fiddle and guitar stopped in mid-note, and the rhythmic beat of feet blended into a concerted stamping as the customers rushed out front.

Ballinger waited another moment or so, then said, "Come on."

JIM AND Shorty hit the back stairs in unison and rushed up, going in through the door with guns in their hands. There was no movement in the hall, and Shorty slapped his hand over the bracketed oil lamp on the wall, darkening the passageway so their movement wouldn't be seen so easily.

"You take the right side," Ballinget said, and opened the first door to the left. He found one of the camp girls and a fat man in an embrace. "Get out," he ordered. "And keep going." He helfted his gun. "Or do you want to argue?"

He picked up the man's gunbelt off the back of a chair and threw it out the window. The man watched his weapon disappear, looked foolish, and answered. "Your trick, mister; but knock before you enter next time, will you?"

The next two rooms were empty; he flushed another couple out of the next one, and came to the last one which was also empty. Shorty, having about the same luck on the other side, shrugged as they came together. "They're not in this building, that's for sure."

"No," Ballinger admitted. "Makes it tougher, that's all."

Suddenly there was a volley of firing out on the street, and the scuffle of feet as the crowd came back into Jake's. Listening, Shorty interpreted it. "They bumped into our gang. And now they're holing up downstairs."

"Yeah," Ballinger said. "All right, take a couple of those lamps and set some rooms afire up here."

Ballinger followed his own in-

structions. Going into one of the lighted rooms, he lifted the globe off a lighted lamp, unscrewed the wick and poured the coal oil along the edge of the wall without extinguishing the blaze on the wick. Then he dropped the wick into the flowing oil and watched the purple and red blaze eat up against the wall paper and leap toward the ceiling. The building was old and dry, a regular firetrap. Jim gave another room the same treatment, and met Shorty coming out of his side. "That's enough up here," he said, and they went down the outside back stairs.

"Watch it," Shorty yelled, and threw a quick shot at the lower back door which swung open to let two men pour out.

The first man fell in his tracks; the second one withdrew back into the building and closed the door behind him. Ballinger hit the door and found it barred from the inside.

Both men made their way around the front of the building and found the road deserted. Across the road, Ballinger's own men were throwing lead into the windows when he held up his hand and signaled them to stop. Then Jim shouted at the building. "We're burning you out! You people can come out with your hands in the air. Any man bringing his gun out will be killed as he comes through the door. Send your women out first."

Somebody inside laughed loudly, and a quick fusillade of shots came out of the two front windows. The store room had already been plunged into darkness.

Ballinger and Shorty had crossed the road, and Ballinger said, "Hold up, men. We've set the place afire; they'll have to come out in a minute."

IT DID NOT take long for the fire to eat through the ceiling of the store from above. Those across the road saw the first sparks falling through, heard the yells of the women who were trapped inside.

Ballinger shouted his warning again. "Send your women out, then come out with your hands in the air. We've got you surrounded."

Up and down, every cabin, every outbuilding, was sending its long tongues of flame into the upper darkness, the hot drafts of air carrying sparks like skyrockets. The road was a red glow against the black backdrop of the mountainside.

There was a babel of loud argument inside while the fire broke through the roof of the building and sent its licking tongues upward into the darkness. The crackling grew louder, the red glow lighter, and drifting sparks were now falling over the whole scene.

Presently a man's voice came from inside. "All right, we're sending the women out."

Ballinger found Drake. "Kelton will be able to see this fire from anywhere in the mountains. Take over, will you? Line the women up and tell them if they want to walk into town, the town will send them on their way in a stage. Search all men for guns and turn them loose in the mountains. Everybody have a good look at all of them, and give them word that from this minute on they're fair game to be shot on sight. If any of them give you an argument, settle it with him right then and there."

"What are you going to do?"

"I haven't found Kelton and Miss Adair, yet. I think I can manage it now, though. We've got things narrowed down until there can only be one place where he would have her. I'll take Shorty and Red along with me."

He called for Red, who came out of the crowd, and the three of them went for their horses, while Drake and the others attended to the capture of Kelton's men in the burning settlement.

"Well, that's the end of one sore spot," Shorty grinned. "Keep on and you'll have these here hills disgustingly clean."

"What were you doing, Red?" Ballinger asked.

"Doing a job," Red said. "I found a fellow I knew hanging out with a gal that's got a petunia bed in her

yard. He's not too bad a guy, and so I had a talk with him. Made him a deal. He wanted to take that flower-loving sweetie of his and go somewhere and start over, so I let him go in exchange for information. Kelton was here only an hour ago with the schoolteacher, then he and another hombre took her to his place. The other hombre was to guard her at Kelton's house till Kelton got back from that business that he had with the other half of his men. Know what? It's my guess that he was prepared to do either of two things; if he didn't succeed in completely taking over everything, he would have his men drive all the stock he's got on down to Durant and sell it. He was apparently going to take his money and what he got from this night's work, and light out, taking the schoolteacher with him. And leaving the rest of the boys to hold the bag, I reckon; that would be like him."

"That's what it looks like. Ready to lead us to his house? It's a long way, I expect."

"Not as long as you think," Red answered. "I'll show you how he fooled you once in a while. Come on."

Ballinger, Shorty and Red got their horses and Red led them down the road, out of the edge of the burning town, and to an old barn that sat against the road, its back against the hillside. "You went a long way around to find those cattle," he said. "Watch this."

The front of the barn was set back from the road by only the width of a drainage ditch with a log culvert over it. Red dismounted and threw open a wide pair of double doors and went into the barn.

"Strike a match," he called when Ballinger and Shorty followed him in.

AT THE rear of the barn, by the light of a match in Shorty's hand, Red threw open two more door. "This," he said, "was one of Kelton's pet projects. There's a draw leading up from this back door, and the draw is dry most of the time, fed only in wet weather by the drainage from the hillside. When it's dry, the draw is used as a shortcut trail to Kelton's hidden ranch. Coming into the barn from the rear, and with the barn doors closed, nobody would find this trail in a hundred years. This barn has swallowed up many a one of your calves, brought in a wagonbed with a wagonsheet hiding them."

"Set her afire and let's go," Ballinger ordered.

A little hay and a match set the old barn blazing, and the three of them rode the trail up to Kelton's ranch. Looking back occasionally, Ballinger saw the red nimbus over the burning settlement, and it worried him.

"Let's move faster," he urged. "Kelton can see that fire, and he'll know what it means. He might take a notion to pull his stakes before we get there."

"I doubt it," Red said, spurring his horse up. "That man hates you with a hatred that is something special. He blames you for every piece of bad luck he has; when he hates a man, I believe he'd stick his own neck into a beartrap to get that man."

"I haven't even seen him to know him," Ballinger said.

"But he's made a point of seeing you," Red said.

"And now, I'm making a point of seeing him."

They moved steadily through the dark draw, climbing continuously until half an hour, and then an hour had ticked off, a time which seemed an eternity to Ballinger, whose fear for June drove him to press on at a speed the horses could not long endure. Time seemed to have stopped for him, and the fear in him for her safety was a thing that hurt him deeply and without end.

The sky was getting gray in the east when Red pulled his horse up alongside him.

"Just another hundred yards around that turn and we'll go out into the open," he cautioned. "We'll come out behind a barn, so we can't

be seen from the house. What are you going to do?"

Desperate with anxiety about the girl, filled with a burning urge to destroy Kelton once for all, Ballinger threw caution to the winds. "We're going to do just what we came to do. I'm riding up to Kelton's house and search it for him and the girl, and I don't give a damn if he's got an army guarding it."

Kelton did not have an army guarding it. The place looked deserted when the three riders burst out of the draw and rode around the barn. Ballinger gave the view one quick sweep of his eyes as he rode on directly toward the wide low log house, sitting in a flat green bowl filled with contented grazing cattle. It was beautiful, it was a hidden paradise—with a snake in it.

Off to the left there was a cluster of small cabins, and the place he identified as the store he had been told about. He gave them a quick glance, noticed that there were only three horses tied to the hitchrail in front of the house, and none in the corral or horse pasture.

He rode up close to the rear of the house and dismounted. Dropping his reins he kept moving fast as the two men followed him. He silently opened the kitchen door and walked into a rather neat place. He walked on through the kitchen and came to a big living room and came face to face with the man who had caused the whole valley so much trouble and tragedy.

Absorbed in packing a valise with things out of his desk, Byrd Kelton had not heard him enter.

"All right, Kelton."

The man turned and saw Ballinger for the first time, and sat frozen at his desk while Ballinger got his first look at the man.

KELTON had been described to him already, and Red's description fitted him like a glove. Undersized, narrow faced and with deep sunk sharp eyes, the man was completely lacking in anything prepossessing. The only thing that would distinguish him from any other nondescript undersized man was the shrewd look in his eyes as he observed Ballinger. His lips were thin and drawn tightly together so that there were converging wrinkles in the corners of his mouth.

A sense of his own inadequacy, Ballinger thought. *That's the thing that has driven him to rise above himself. He resents other men's size, their looks, their success in everyday enterprizes; and some atavistic sense of jealousy drives him to crush his betters. A man like that is dangerous as long as he is above ground. There's no turning back for his kind.*

Kelton took his time studying the intruder, and finally he said, "Well. So you're Ballinger!"

"I'm Ballinger. I came for Miss Adair."

"Yes. I halfway expected you would be here when I saw what you were doing to Pinetop. But you got here sooner than I thought you would."

He looked over Ballinger's shoulder and saw Shorty and Red. "I see," he said. "It was my red-headed friend who showed you the way."

"Never mind that," Ballinger said. "I've come for Miss Adair."

"You are too late," Kelton said. "I've sent her on to a safer place."

"I think you are a liar, Kelton; she's your Ace-in-the-Hole, and you wouldn't let her get very far out of your sight."

"You may have something there," Kelton answered. "How'll you trade? You want her back for personal reasons, I suppose? Well, I want her for personal reasons as well. I've got all the money I want, so you'll have to think of a pretty big price for her."

"Kelton, get on your feet," Bal-

Another Fine Story
by Allan K. Echols
TRAGIC OUTLAW
appears in the August issue of
FAMOUS WESTERN

linger said. "You've got about thirty seconds to tell me where she is before I kill you."

"I believe you'd do it," Kelton answered.

He got to his feet, then turned away from Ballinger and picked a piece of paper off his desk. "Here's a note Miss Adair was leaving for you. I'm sure you'd be interested in seeing it. Her last word to you."

He held the scrap of paper out in the right hand which Ballinger was watching, and Ballinger held out his right hand to receive it. Both had their hands on it when Kelton's left hand appeared magically out of his pants pocket with a short-barreled gun in it.

And both men's hands were on the paper when an explosion and a puff of smoke came out of the blue bandanna sling which carried Ballinger's left hand concealed.

Kelton's gun exploded before it was lifted, the bullet plowing the floor. Ballinger's bullet knocked a grunt out of him, and he spun around with the impact of it, sinking to his knees with his back to Ballinger.

He fell on the floor and rolled over on his side. "You tricked me," he groaned. "You had a hidden gun—"

"I don't fight rattlesnakes according to sportsmen's rules," Ballinger said. "I fight them according to their own rules."

But Kelton did not hear him. He had jerked convulsively, and rolled over onto his back, his mouth and eyes open—dead.

BALLINGER was looking down at him when he heard the other shot in the house, and he turned and went in the direction from which it came. He walked into the next room and stumbled over the body of a man writhing under the impact of a bullet from Shorty's gun.

And June Adair was running out to meet him. She threw her arms around him and put her head on his chest. "I knew you'd be here, Jim," she cried. "I knew it all along. I wasn't even frightened—that is, not very much."

"He was getting ready to take you away?"

"Yes. This man was guarding me while Kelton was away the early part of the night. But Kelton came back just an hour ago, and he was furious and scared. I could tell that something had gone wrong with his plans. He said we were going on a trip, and I was afraid you wouldn't get here before we left."

"I'd have followed you all the way to Chamkatca—"

"It's Kamchatca, Jim. Would you have?"

"Yes, teacher—anywhere, no matter how you say it. Even back to Illinois."

"Why, Jim, you know I could never go back to Illinois. I became a pioneer out there in that cave. Imagine me, a woman who has picked up a gun and killed an outlaw in defense of her man—"

"Say that again—"

"I said imagine me going back to such a dull—"

"I heard you the first time. In defense of your man. Well, lady, it is going to be a little more peaceful around here for a while, but just as soon as the rest of the party comes along and we get our cattle driven down home, you and I are going to see a man about a wedding."

His arm slid out of the blue bandanna sling. He dropped the gun on the floor and held her tightly to him.

"Jim," she objected. "You shouldn't be using that arm now. Your shoulder."

"Never mind. You're not my nurse any longer. You've got a more important function in my life. Stop giving me orders, and turn your face up here where I can reach your lips."

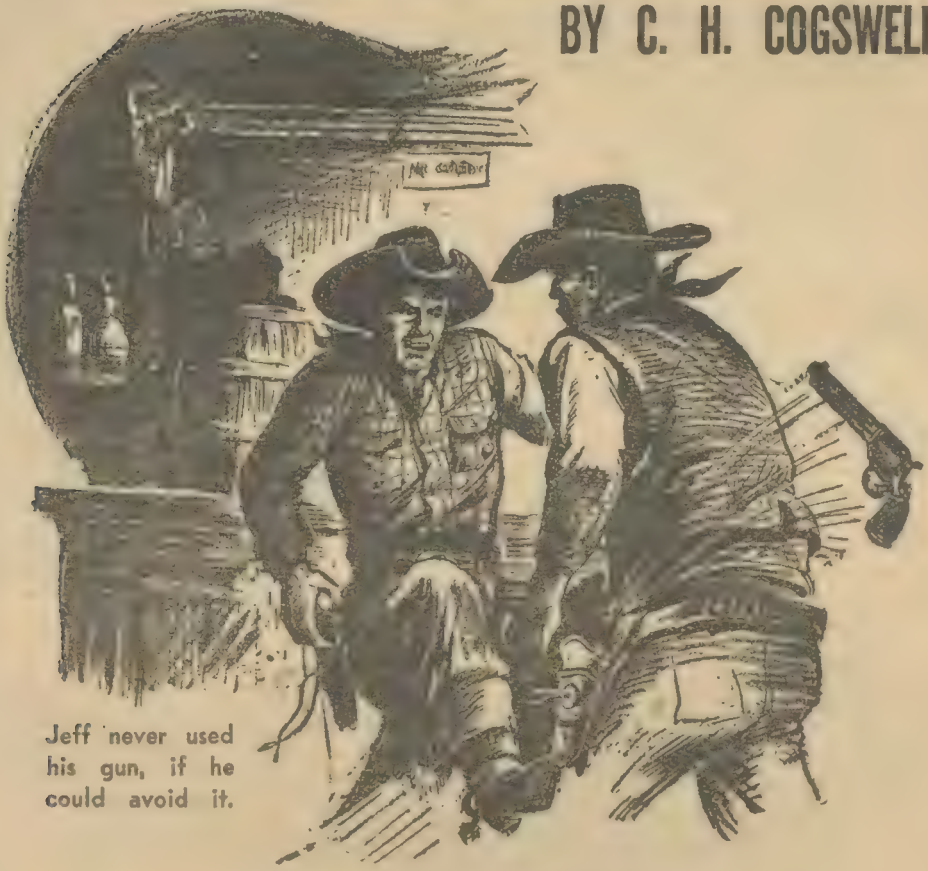
Shorty grabbed Red by the sleeve. "Come on out here a minute," he said. "I want you to show me around this place."

They slipped out of the room, and Jim and June never knew it.

●

Accidently ON PURPOSE

BY C. H. COGSWELL



Jeff never used his gun, if he could avoid it.

• • •

They had Jeff Hardy figured out as a yellow-back, and it was true that he had run away, once. But it took more courage to back out, the way Jeff had done, than it would have taken to stay there and exchange lead. Particularly, when a gent could handle a gun as well as Hardy could...

• • •

JEFF HARDY moved nervously to the window of the bunkhouse and with his hunting knife scratched away the frost and peered out. The little fuzzy sheep dog padded at his heels.

"Well Bruce," he said, having no human to confide in. "The blizzard is gettin' worse and the Crandall's ain't come in yet. It ain't natural for 'em t'stay away from a comfortable fire a day like this unless..."

A hard glint came into Hardy's usually warm brown eyes and a thoughtful expression pinched his

strong features. He leaned over and pulled affectionately at the little scrubby dog's ears. "It's a hell of a situation to have to live in a bunkhouse with two hombres intendin' t'kill yuh."

He went to the pot-bellied stove, thrust in a large chunk of wood, and hunched his chair closer to the stove. The little dog curled up at his feet.

"It's warm enough in here," he told the dog, "but just lookin' out there at that snow gives me the shivers. Oh Mama, why did I ever leave Texas? That's right Bruce, thump that stumpy tail of yours on the floor. That's enough t'let me know if they intend t'sneak up on me in my sleep, or growl at 'em. I ain't scared of 'em as long as I can see 'em; it's what they do behind my back that spooks me. Who would have thought they'd have follered me away up here in Wyoming?"

●

Well, Dan Crandall had made a mistake about Bruce. He had kicked the dog and got a tongue-lashing from Charlie Crandall for doing it. Jeff had heard them arguing about it in the barn one day when they didn't know he was there. He had been in the loft above inspecting the timothy hay to see if there was any sign of mildew. Big John Steelman, owner of the S Lazy J, had a valuable stallion. "Look the hay over good, Jeff, and look careful for mildew. That roof is pretty fair but once in a blue moon we get a few drops o'rain up here. I sure don't want a sick horse. Yuh know what mildew is?"

"The part of Texas I'm from is so dry we never have mildew," Jeff responded; "but I think I know what it is."

"It's a funny thing," Big John observed, "that a man who is from Texas always brags about his state, *and still he's from Texas and not goin' to Texas!* If Texas is so all-fired good I wonder why they leave!"

HARDY COULD not get angry with Big John Steelman. There was a peculiar warmth about the man and a sort of humorous something about his sarcasm which deprived it of its sharp edge. "I reckon the Crandalls have been givin' yuh a bad time, eh?" Jeff drawled. "If yuh don't like their conversation, why don't yuh fire 'em? I do most of their work anyhow."

At that Big John looked embarrassed and turned abruptly away. He didn't answer but left Jeff standing there for a moment. Nor did Big John look back as he strode toward the house. Big John did not act like a coward; but then, the Crandalls were tough hombres—two tough hombres. You couldn't blame a man for letting two toughies like them run a whizzer over you. As Jeff looked at the big man's receding back, he thought of his own case. Yes, he had reasons for leaving Texas, good reasons—the two Crandall brothers!

"Hell," he spit the word out and kicked a small stone with the toe of his boot. "He could make it a lot easier on me if he'd pay 'em off and send 'em packin'. As for work, they shore don't carry their own weight!"

"We coulda wore him down," Charlie fumed, "but then he got that damned dog! Never heard of a sheep-herder sellin' his dog before."

"Sheep-herder was probably drunk," Dan opined. "No sheep-herder would sell a dog as good as Bruce unless he was drunk or had a big pot in a poker game."

"Yeah," Charlie sneered, "yuh make it appear that the dog is so good; but if yuh hadn't kicked him we might coulda made friends with the dog. Without that dog we coulda double-teamed him. He can't do his work without sleep and one of us could sleep while the other watched. Now he just goes off to sleep with his hand an inch from his gun and lets the dog look out for him!"

"It would have been a cinch," Charlie went on, "to knock him in the head then carry him and dump him in the stall with Blue Boy!"

"Yuh shoulda thought of that before he got the dog," Dan sneered.

"Yuh never have a good thought until it's too late. You claim to have all the brains—why don't you think up something else?"

"Don't worry," Charlie responded with determination. "I will!"

●

"No Bruce," Jeff Hardy reflected aloud, "it don't pay t'run away from trouble. Now I was a Deputy Sheriff, and though I found out that I wasn't suited to that job because I don't like killin', it was a mistake t'pull up stakes and leave. I'd at least been able to make it an even break wearin' that badge. I give them other two Crandalls a fair enough break and if I hadn't been gosh awful fast I'd probably got myself killed for my troubles. That was luck Bruce, plain Gawd given luck. I didn't shoot t'kill because I got a streak of religion I guess. Plenty of people die for their religion; but my religion ain't that strong. It just gives me a feelin'—I can't explain it to a human Bruce—but a human life is a human life. If it ain't got life it ain't worth lovin' old boy. That's why I feel close to you." He reached down and stroked the dog's ear.

Bruce looked up with adoring eyes and thumped his stubby tail on the rough floor. He seemed to understand.

"Well Bruce," Jim went on after a pause. "We gotta talk these things out. Never get 'em straight in our minds until we put things in words. Some folks write 'em down in a diary, and some take 'em to confession to a Priest. I'm not good at writin' and my religion doesn't include any Priest though maybe they got somethin' I've missed. Maybe one of these days I'll give 'em a try and see."

"But there is somethin' in a man that sets him out from other men. Makes him different. It's the way he looks to Gawd and the way he thinks and feels. No two people think and feel exactly alike though they do imitate each other a lot. We're a lot like monkeys and we try to be like those we admire. The only thing is, we're forever pickin' the wrong models. There just ain't nothin' human wrapped in one package we oughta worship unless maybe it's the Lord, and he's been gone so long we sometimes wonder. Then too, the Lord lived before Ol' Man Colt invented the .45. Reckon probably he would have run the money mongers out of the temple with a six-gun instead of a whip if he'd had one eh?"

BRUCE GAVE three thumps with his tail in agreement.

"As I was sayin'," he went on. "It's our thinkin' and feelin' about things that makes us do what we do. Now as I said, I didn't want t'kill them two hombres when I arrested them though I'd have been perfectly justified on account of the badge I'd taken with my oath of office. I was sworn to uphold the law and I was supposed t'back it up with my guns. I did. I put a bullet in each of 'em in the nick of time. In a way it was self defense; *but I wouldn't have had to do it if I hadn't taken that Deputy's job!* And after I'd done it I was scared that they would die. I sweat blood hopin' and prayin' they wouldn't die. Well dog, what do yuh think of that?" He got up and strode up and down the bunk house, looked into the stove then sat down again.

"I suppose yuh wonder why I'm tellin' yuh all this," he continued. "Well, I got a feelin' that this is the day I go smack up against the blade as they say. *This is a good day for a murder, a murder that looks like an accident.* The Crandalls are out there in that blizzard right now riggin' a trap t'kill me and I gotta make up my mind what I'm goin' t'do about it. A coyote wouldn't go near the trap, but Bruce, I'm no coyote. I'm not runnin' any farther from trouble. Win or lose Old Boy, today I'm goin' t'face the music, and if it's necessary I'll kill to defend my life!"

So resolved, Jeff cleaned and oiled his Frontier Model Colt .45, tried its action, then made several practice draws from his worn holster.

"Smooth as silk," he smiled grimly. "We don't know for sure if there's a hell, and we don't know what it takes t'send us there—maybe killin' another man would do it. But then, if we got enough black marks chalked up against us to go there anyhow, sure Gawd wouldn't condemn us for defendin' our own lives. Then too, I wonder how He judges them that fight in wars. Oh well, that's too deep for me."

A shuffling of feet outside in the snow caused a tightness in the pit of his stomach and a queer sensation up and down his back. The little dog, sensing the nervousness of his master arose and stood stiff legged, the hackles on his back rigid.

Hardy strode to the door and jerked it open. "Oh, hello Big John, I was a wonderin' who it was. What was keepin' yuh?"

"Just takin' off my mittens," Big John responded advancing toward the stove. "Yuh know Jeff, I've got an uneasy feelin' somethin' is badly wrong. Frank Taylor just dropped by t'tell me the drift fence at the Gap is down and some of my cattle driftin' through. Said maybe twenty head already gone through and in this wind yuh know what will happen."

"Yeah, I know," Jeff agreed with a worried frown, his eyes slitting thoughtfully. "Yuh probably will lose maybe twenty head of cattle over that cliff below."

"I just went out and took a look around the barns, corrals and haystacks," Big John went on. "Everything seems alright, still I got a feelin'—well, damn it Jeff, where the hell are the Crandalls?"

HARDY SHRUGGED and nervously rolled a cigarette then handed Big John the makings. He then opened the stove door and lighted a twig from the embers then applied it to his quirlie. His face was grim in the red glow. "If yuh can tell me what the Crandalls have been doin' and where they are," he bit off the words viciously, "I'll tell yuh how come the drift fence is down up at the Gap. I worked on that fence nigh on two weeks. I built it plenty stout and braced the posts against the wind. No blizzard could blow that fence down John, yuh know that as well as I do. What the Crandalls got on yuh anyhow?"

"Nothin'," Big John said evasively.

"How come yuh t'give 'em a job then?" Jeff insisted.

"Well, to tell yuh the truth," Big John admitted, his face going crimson under Hardy's steady gaze. "I—I guess they had me buffaloed. I could tell when they asked for a job that they intended t'get one. I figgered it was best t'be obligin' since I got my men scattered out on the range at the various cabins. Just me and you here and those two hombres are plenty salty. What chance would we have against 'em?"

"I reckon yuh underrated me," Jeff responded, grimly sarcastic. "Yuh might have known I'd back yuh up if yuh'd just let me know yuh wanted t'send 'em packin'."

"From what I've seen of you," Big John sneered, "you wouldnt back up a fly! Why man alive, yuh'd run from yore own shadow! I don't know what it is that spooked yuh, but whatever it was, it shore took the confidence outa yuh. Might say I was one against two and those two are real gun men! I never claimed t'be handy with a gun, ropin' and tyin' is my meat."

"Well," Hardy said frankly, "we'll admit we're both a couple of cowards. I'm runin' away from somethin' and though you didn't run, yet yuh keep mighty close to yore hole. As for handlin' a gun, I'm pretty handy with a shootin' iron. Here, I'll show yuh!" With that as if by magic his gun leaped into his hand. Big John's eyes bulged.

"Now it's us two against two of them," Jeff went on. "If we're smart and lucky, we can outsmart 'em. Shootin' on a day like this ain't what it's cracked up t'be anyhow. Are yuh ready t'ride?"

"Not me," Big John shivered. "I'm stayin' close to the fire. I think the drift fence up at the Gap is just a trap t'get me up there. If a man got

caught in a herd movin' over that precipice—"

"He'd be like a rodeo bronc goin' through a chute," Jeff admitted. "The walls close in on both sides; but there's one place a fella might get out. Chances are the Crandalls wouldn't really try it against both of us. Anyhow, it's just your imagination probably; they got yuh scared and yuh think they plan t'kill yuh. What would they stand t'gain?"

"With things the way they are," Big John explained sullenly, "they probably think with me outa the way they could work my cattle for several months. They've made themselves scarce around here most of the time. Ain't many people if any is supposed t'know they're here and —t'tell the truth, I sent 'em as far away from the ranch as I dared. I had a feelin' all along what they was up to, so one night I made a fast ride t'town and got in touch with the Sheriff. Sure enough, I had 'em pegged right. They're killers alright, but somehow they've managed t'keep their killin' within the law or I'd a had the Sheriff out here t'make an arrest."

FOR A MOMENT Jeff held his breath. "Yuh didn't by any chance get a line on me too while yuh was at it?"

"Nope," Big John looked embarrassed before Hardy's direct gaze. "I mentioned in my message that yuh might be a hunted man, but somehow there's no evidence turned up against yuh yet. Yuh didn't—didn't break outa jail or somethin' did yuh Son?"

Jeff smiled and looked the other squarely in the eyes. "Do I look like a criminal?" he countered.

"No," Big John admitted, "I've never had that thought in mind about yuh. T'be truthful, I've felt a lot better havin' yuh around the place than anyone I've ever hired. I like yuh Jeff; I trust yuh. I won't give yuh away. Come clean. What is it yore runnin' away from?"

"If I live, I'll tell yuh," Hardy responded. "As for now, let's just leave it as it is. I give yuh my word it ain't the law I'm runnin' from and though it might look to a lot of people that I'm a coward, it ain't that either—not really." He began pulling on his chaps.

"What yuh plannin' t'do now?" Big John demanded.

"Seein' as how you're afraid t'go with me," Hardy gave Big John a withering glance, "I reckon I'll have t'go alone. I'm ridin' out t'the Gap and see what I can do about hazin' yore cattle back where they'll be safe."

"Now wait a minute Jeff," Big John got up and strode back and forth nervously. "I wasn't aimin' t'test yore nerve. Bein' a damn fool ain't goin' t'get either of us any place. There's too much risk in it and besides yuh couldn't do much with that drift fence in this storm."

"If what I think's wrong with it, I can," Hardy responded tartly. "If I don't miss my guess yuh'll find a couple of trees fell across it. Nothin' that's done by a couple of saddle hosses and a lariat can't be undone by a couple of hosses and a lariat."

He paused significantly, giving Big John a penetrating glance. "Of course, an axe might be a handy thing t'bring along; only thing is, I'll be in a kind of a hurry."

"Now wait a minute," Big John held up a restraining hand. "Let's be sensible about this, Jeff. No herd of cattle is worth a man's life. I'm still Boss of this outfit, yuh understand? I'm orderin' yuh not t'go out there. It's plain suicide man, and I don't want yore blood on my conscience."

"If yuh got one," Hardy observed drily, still not giving up hope that he could win Big John over. "If yuh got a conscience, why not fork yore hoss and ride with me."

"To Hell with you," Big John blustered. "I ain't goin'." Then an idea seemed to strike him. "Say! Is there somethin' personal between you and the Crandall Brothers?"

Jeff's eyes hardened and his mouth became a firm line. "There might be," he admitted. "There might be, but what it is you'll probably never know." He pulled his

hat down tight, put on his mittens and stepped out into the storm.

•

AS JEFF HARDY rode toward the gap the fury of the storm increased and Jeff experienced a feeling of futility, of impending disaster. Just being out in the elements alone on a day like this was bad enough. So many little things could happen which might cause a person's death. The horse might stumble on the rocky trail and the fall if not fatal itself would be fatal in its consequences. An unconscious man would soon freeze to death in weather like this.

There seemed to be an unusually large number of cattle along the drift fence, that is, many more than would ordinarily have drifted down of their own accord.

"Now if I could just get around behind 'em and push another little herd down on top of 'em they'd be caught in their own trap," he mused. "I know the place a heap better than they do and I don't reckon they know about that crack in the cliff down there. I could draw 'em down close between the two cliffs by stayin' ahead of the cattle then slip through that crack in the cliff, ride like hell back behind 'em and haze some cattle down on top of 'em! Two could play that game as well as they!"

Then he shook his head worriedly and looked at the sky. The storm was getting worse. "The hell of it is, in this storm I might miss that crack and if I do I'm sunk!"

As he had predicted there were a couple of fallen trees across the drift fence and there were cattle on the other side. He rode in among them, cut out a few and put them back through the fence.

"That will make 'em show their hand," he smiled grimly. "They'll be expectin' me to round up the whole bunch and put 'em back all at one time!"

Then suddenly he pulled his horse to a dead stop. "Wait a minute!" he ejaculated. "One of 'em is down there! These critters would be driftin' down the ravine—driftin' with the storm if someone wasn't holdin' 'em back. I'll put a few more back through the drift fence then gather up a pretty good herd, but instead of drivin' 'em back I'll run 'em hell for leather down the ravine with the storm. Whoever is down there will get caught and if the other Crandall tries t'get down there t'help, I'll swing back and haze some more cattle down on top of him!"

His last plan seemed the most logical. He took out a few more cattle and hazed them over on the right hand side of the gap in the fence. He turned back to gather another herd when he observed that cattle seemed to be moving toward the gap from where he had just put them.

"That's funny," he breathed in perplexity. "If the Crandalls had been along that side I'd probably seen some evidence of 'em." He gathered a considerable number below the fence, then dashed back to put the stragglers back on the right hand side again. He had just succeeded in stopping the movement of cattle along the right hand side when he saw a similar movement along the left hand side of the gap. It was evident that the other Crandall was starting his play.

He dashed back toward the herd he had gathered and began to drive them down the ravine. Back and forth he moved shouting and waving. Slowly at first then faster, they moved down the gap and toward their certain doom. So intent was he on his purpose that he was unaware of the flood of cattle pouring through the gap and sweeping down on him from behind. For a few minutes the fury of the storm let up and looking back he could see one man waving something in his hand and riding furiously behind the cattle. Jeff was caught in the middle of the herd and they were moving in a relentless flood down toward those two precipitous walls which would make his escape impossible.

"Damn you Crandall," he shouted

angrily as he drew his gun. "I'll take one of you with me!" He snapped off a shot over his shoulder at the man crowding the cattle toward him; but the answering shots were not directed at him. They were intended to accelerate the speed of the cattle. In the distance, Jeff thought he heard other shots but as the storm suddenly came down again in greater fury than ever, he was not sure.

"Must be the other Crandall off to my left tryin' t'tighten up the herd so I can't get out," he gritted. "Well, I ain't whipped yet! They don't know about that crack in the wall over here on my right!"

BUT HIS determination was blunted and his confidence left him as he moved down the gap. The cattle seemed to be getting denser and more closely packed about him by the second. The storm also, as though being blown through a funnel at this end of the ravine obscured his vision. Objects became indistinct blurs before him, then a tree loomed up before him and his heart skipped a beat as new hope surged up within him. He tried to guide his horse toward it and as he approached it, he reached for a low hanging limb. He had it in his grasp but his hands were numb from the cold and his body was stiff in the saddle. Pain shot through his body as he was twisted in the saddle and bent backwards. He writhed about clinging desperately to keep from falling and as his fumbling numb fingers found the saddle horn he realized where he was. He remembered that tree and he knew it was not far from the crevice in the cliff through which he hoped to escape. Between him and that hope was a packed mass of bellowing plunging cattle!

He put spurs to his horse with a cruel viciousness which made him feel guilty and ashamed, but the horse reared and plunged ahead and came down on the back of one of the cows. He kept his seat in the saddle with difficulty, yet he knew that he was making progress. With

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FAMOUS WESTERN

numbed fingers he again reached for his gun and the kick of it against his palm almost knocked it from his nerveless hand as he fired. One of the critters went down and for a moment there was a tiny space through which his horse was able to proceed. He fired again and again, wildly, desperately trying to blaze an opening until his gun was empty. He hurled it at the nearest cow's head and jerking off his wide brimmed hat he began to fan it about, shouting. The horse was shouldering his way toward the blank looking wall ahead, shouldering his way as a good cutting horse knows how to do and still there seemed to be too many cattle in his way. Then he saw the opening ahead of him and his heart sank for the press of cattle was sweeping him onward and there seemed to be nothing he could do to save himself. The cattle were now pressing so closely against him that he could not even free himself from the saddle.

Then a huge steer lunged against them from behind. One of his horns grazed Jeff's leg as the huge animal swung his head then it gouged the front shoulder of the horse. Again the horse reared and plunged to one side and the big steer went past like a football player running interference. The pain in the horse's shoulder was driving him mad as he reared and plunged, frantically trying to free himself from the pressing herd.

THEN, STILL holding the reins in one hand, Jeff found himself flying through space and expecting to be trampled to death, a wild idea of riding one of the cows over the precipice flashing through his mind. But there was no cow ahead of him when he landed. He found himself in a huge drift of snow in the opening of the crevice in the cliff. "Whoa boy, whoa!" he shouted, trying to quiet his frantic horse. "We made it old boy, we made it!"

Suddenly weary to exhaustion, he slumped back in the drifted snow, peculiarly dizzy and weak. He was only vaguely aware of his surroundings as he and his horse were pressed into the snow filled opening. The cattle continued to plunge past in front of them and the storm continued in intermittent gusts. One minute he could see clearly across the gap, the next minute the snow would be so thick he could see only a few yards. He remembered his purpose to escape the herd through this opening in the cliff, ride back behind the two Crandall Brothers and haze more cattle down on top of them. It looked like a silly idea now, for the crack in the cliff was completely filled with snow. It would be impossible to get out that way. He would have to wait until the cattle had passed then escape his temporary sanctuary. He sighed wearily, all resistance and resentment toward the Crandalls somehow gone out of him.

"Wherever I go," he mumbled, "I'll have 'em on my trail, never knowin' when I'll find a burr under my saddle, never knowin' when a loop will come out of the darkness and settle down around me jerkin' me from my hoss, maybe—maybe even a shot in the back! It's more than a man can stand. It's best t'face 'em out, come right out in the open and dare 'em t'draw; only thing is they probably wouldn't. I was shore a fool t'turn in my Deputy's Badge. Sooner or later I could have sent 'em up for somethin' or shot it out with 'em like I did the other two brothers. Anyhow it would have been done legal."

Then he raised his eyes as he heard a terrified shout and for a moment he could see clearly across the gap and for a second he could easily have tossed a rope over him was Charlie Crandall, his brutal savage face contorted in terror, his eyes bugging out of their sockets. "Help—for Gawd's sake help!" he shouted.

Instinctively Jeff leaped to his horse and grabbed for his lariat. One mitten was still in one hand and he flung it off in his haste to untie the leather thongs which held his lariat in place. His hands were too stiff with cold. By the time he had

his rope loose Charlie Crandall was gone and Dan Crandall, farther out was also going his terrifying way. He shook out the loop and made a futile toss. The rope swished out, was caught by the wind and tossed back. The Crandalls had been caught in their own trap!

The herd of cattle went by bellowing, followed by only a few stragglers. The storm in seeming perversity against human nature had spent itself and there was a temporary calm. Jeff examined his horse's shoulder and forebore to mount him. Proceeding out on the trampled snow and leading his horse, he was vaguely uneasy. He looked down through the gap and saw that all the cattle had not plunged over the precipice below. There were still some stragglers. Seeing that his horse was not too lame, he mounted and rode up the ravine toward the drift fence.

As he approached the opening which had been made by the two fallen trees he heard the sound of an axe and urged his horse into a trot. There was the explanation for what had happened. There was the reason why the cattle had moved along the drift fence on his right when he had hazed a few of them across the opening. Big John was chopping vigorously on the fallen logs, getting ready to repair the drift fence. He had lost a lot of cattle that day, he wasn't taking any chances of losing any more unnecessarily—and three men too. A foolish thing trying to save a man's cattle in a storm like this. A mighty foolish thing!

"Git along hoss," Hardy urged, "after all, he did me a mighty big favor. It was my idea only I couldn't have done it all by myself, a darn good idea too. And I'm glad he did it instead of me, because I never wanted another man's blood on my hands—another man's life is another man's life. I'll bet Big John will be surprised to see me. The look on his face will be worth rememberin'!"

•

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FUGITIVES OF THE SAGE

By T. W. Ford

In the July issue of

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BULLETS FROM THE DUST

If we let McCracken get away with fence-cutting, and burning our buildings, he'll take to drygulching next; he means to drive all the farmers out, one way or another.

● By LEE FLOREN ●

THE GOLCONDA was the only building in Elkhorn that had a concrete sidewalk and Swamper Bill Roser's broom made a grating sound as he swept across its rough surface. But the swamper could still hear what Brenda Campbell said to Deputy Joe Berry.

"Somebody cut the fence around our oat field last night; Circle sheep grazed on it when we woke this morning. They ate all our oats right down to the ground!" The young woman's voice was not too steady.

Bill swept on and apparently paid no attention to the pair who stood in front of the next-door building, the General Store. But he swept toward the couple, not away from them.

"Fence cut! Surely, that's a broad statement, ain't it, Mrs. Campbell? Are you shore the fence didn't fall down of its own accord? Never did look like it was put up right to me."

"Those wires were cut, sir."

The deputy rubbed his jaw in apparent thought. "I'll ride out an'

look for myself. Where's your husband?"

Mrs. Campbell said her husband had ridden over to Center City yesterday and would be back home this afternoon. "I'm glad he was gone; he'd have got his rifle and ridden over to the Circle sheep camp."

"Tell Mike to forget that gun, madam."

Deputy Joe Berry's voice held a threat. Swamper Bill Roser watched the anger surge into Brenda Campbell's pretty face. She was about twenty, he figured; her husband about twenty-four. The hot-headed age. "Do those sheepmen—that Lureman and McCracken—do they pay your wages, Mr. Berry?"

"The county pays my wages, madam." Berry was very stiff and formal.

"Then why don't you earn them? Last week our barn was burned down and our home almost caught on fire. That barn had no reason to burn. Now our fence was cut. Circle sheep destroyed our oats field and we worked so hard —"

"Madam, watch your tongue, please."

"I will, sir, when you do something for us farmers!"

Deputy Berry glanced suddenly at Swamper Bill but the old man was interested only in his sweeping. Then Berry looked back at Mrs. Campbell.

Berry began, "Mrs. Campbell, you're upset an' you've—"

He would have said more but just then Doc Smith opened the door to his office. "Mrs. Campbell, you may take your baby now."

"All right, doctor."

Doc Smith held the little girl. She was almost three, Swamper Bill realized; Brenda and Mike Campbell had married very young.

Little Louise called, "Mama, come here."

Deputy Joe Berry turned and went toward the livery stable. Brenda Campbell took another twist in her limp handkerchief. She had reached the point where conversation was an emotional release. "I guess I said too much, Bill."

She was clean, and she was good —and those were the qualities that counted in a man or a woman or a horse.

"Maybe you did, Mrs. Campbell."

"I guess I've got too much temper. But I can still see our oats field—tramped down—those Circle sheep on it— One half of our years income is gone!"

"Too bad."

"We've got only our wheat left. And when Mike comes home and finds this out—with his temper—"

"He's in Center City?"

"Yes, trying to borrow money from the bank there. This local bank won't lend a farmer a cent—these two sheepmen own it."

"Send him to talk to me when he gets home."

"I'll try, Bill."

"Mama."

BRENDA CAMPBELL went into Doc Smith's office. Bill finished his sweeping and then went into the Golcanda and hung up his broom. Shanty O'Brien, the big Irishman, was behind the bar. "Trouble out there, Swamper Bill?"

Bill told him. Shanty rubbed a hairy forearm across his mouth to wipe away the stain of his morning beer. "I don't cotton to it, Bill."

"Neither do I."

Swamper Bill Roser went about his morning chores with a listlessness, despite the fact that the day was Saturday—the big day on this range.

Two years before, six farmers had moved in. They had taken up valley claims and timber claims. From their timber stands, three of them had build log houses. The other three had lived in tents for a summer, looked the situation over, then, with the first sting of snow hitting them on the south end, had deserted their claims for a milder climate.

Lureman and McCracken had been in the Golconda when the three farmers had boarded the train. Peck Lureman had said, "Well, there goes three of them parasites—jes' one-

half. An' unless my guess is plumb wrong, them other three'll drift out come spring, if not before."

"This ain't no farmin' country," Barney McCracken had said; "this country's too dry to farm in. Them other three's got to leave, too."

But the three had not left. With Mike Campbell as their leader, they dammed Beaver Creek, diverted its waters, and irrigated. The first year they didn't have much of a crop, due to the fact ditches had not been built to properly irrigate; but they had strung their barbwire fences, and those barbwire fences kept Circle sheep off range Lureman and McCracken had used for almost two decades—used free because, at that time, it had been government land.

Sheep can crawl under a three-wire fence. So the three farmers had built fences consisting of four and five wires, with the bottom wires down low.

Swamper Bill lined up his spittoons on the board back of the Golconda. He went down the row with buckets of water, washing them out. Then he tipped them upside down to drain and leaned against the saloon, waiting for them to dry. He kept remembering Brenda Campbell. She had had anger in her voice while talking with the deputy, but under that anger had been fear.

She had a lot to lose, if things went too far.

GROCER WILLIAMS came out the back door of his store. He emptied a waste-paper basket into the burning-can. "I don't like the looks of things, Swamper Bill."

"Neither do I."

The grocer pounded the basket against the barrel to loosen debris in it. "She called the deputy, didn't she?"

"She put it up to him square."

"What did Berry say?"

"What could he say?"

Williams seemed interested in the bottom of the waste-paper basket. He picked a thread out of it, balled it up, and threw it aside. "I sure don't like it," he repeated, and went into his store.

Swamper Bill took his spittoons back inside and distributed them. He was sprinkling water over the sawdust floor when Brenda Campbell and little Louise came out of the doctor's office and went to the buggy. The mother put her daughter on the seat and Williams came out of the General Store, carrying a box of groceries. He put them in the back of the buggy, untied the team, and Mrs. Campbell drove out of town.

The grocer stood for a moment watching the rig leave, then returned to his store, and Shanty said, "Williams is worried."

"Yeah?"

"He don't know for sure whether to stay with the sheepmen or go over to the farmers."

"He'll stay with Lureman and McCracken; they spend more money with him than the farmers do."

Shanty looked at him thoughtfully. "This town," the bartender said, "is really in a touchy spot."

Swamper Bill agreed.

Shanty continued with, "Now that Campbell family—they're fine people. They married early, and are devoted, and have a good start on their future and their family."

Swamper Bill kept on sprinkling the floor. He agreed with everything Shanty had said. Elkhorn was in a crisis. Yep, a man should marry when young, but make sure he got the right woman first.

Shanty asked, "You ever get married, Swamper Bill?"

"I was—once."

"I didn't know that. Lemme see, you came here night afore I did, an' that was almost ten years ago. Shucks, they've sure gone fast, one year hightailin' after t'other. What became of your woman?"

"Died."

Shanty said, "Sorry, friend, if I stepped on your privacy." He had a heart as big as his body. "But dang it, I'm worried about Mike Campbell. Well...I reckon he ain't kin to either of us, at that."

"Watch that deputy," Swamper Bill said, "and you can tell what Lureman and McCracken will do."

Deputy Joe Berry returned from the Circle sheep-ranch at about one. He got a pack-horse, loaded him with groceries at the store, and Swamper Bill saw to it he was sweeping the sidewalk when the deputy threw his diamond hitch over the pack.

"Goin' somewhere, Berry?"

Berry said, tersely, "None of your damn' business, swamper."

THE SATURDAY crowd was coming into town. Shanty slid out a bottle and a glass to a man and said to Swamper Bill. "Well, reckon it's here, Swamper Bill. Berry never left town for any other purpose but to give Lureman an' McCracken a free hand."

"I guess you're right."

About three o'clock one of the farmers, Squint Morehead, came into the Golconda. He ordered a beer and Swamper Bill leaned on the end of the bar. "Done heard that Mike Campbell's fence got cut and Circle sheep ate up his oats crop."

"I heard that, too."

Swamper Bill said, "What will Mike do, I wonder?"

"Deputy's takin' care of it, h'ain't he?"

Swamper Bill thought, *You know danged well that deputy's out of town,* but he said, "Berry's left. Went out with a packhorse."

Squint Morehead seemed in a hurry suddenly. He downed his beer in a gulp, set down his mug. "Reckon I gotta get back to my farm," he said, and left.

Shanty came close, said, "Morehead's yellow; he wants no part of this trouble. He'll set out there on his farm with a rifle, thinkin' only of his own property. He don't realize that Mike's fight against the Circle is his fight, too."

"Too ignorant."

Not more than ten minutes later, in came the other farmer, Hoke Giddens. He was about fifty, baldheaded, and he got his beer and the same set of questions from Swamper Bill.

"Sure ain't no fight of mine," Giddens said. Soon he drove out of town, the back of his buckboard loaded with chicken-feed sacks and groceries. And Swamper Bill Roser thought, *By gum, young Mike's all alone, in his fight.*

"Another scared boy," Shanty said.

Saturday was a magnet, drawing men into town. There would be the usual Saturday night dance at the Town Hall, and it would be accompanied by fist-fights and drinking, per usual.

Right after Gidden had left Elkhorn, in came Barney McCracken and Peck Lureman. The two sheepmen drove their buckboard up to the hitchrack and came down, the rig creaking as it lost Barney McCracken's huge bulk.

McCracken was short, but as powerful as a Hereford bull; while Lureman was husky enough, he looked almost thin when compared with his partner.

McCracken said, "Swamper, take the rig to the livery-barn." He tossed Swamper Bill a silver dollar.

Sunlight reflected on silver. Swamper Bill caught it. He needed a dollar, but for some reason this one didn't feel good to his palm; his face showed derision as he tossed it back to the sheepman.

"Nope, McCracken."

"Why not?"

"Not much of a chore to put away your team."

McCracken looked puzzled. He flipped the dollar, caught it, looked at it. He seemed to be inspecting it for a flaw in its quality. Then he caught the significance. "Can't use a sheepman's dollar, huh?"

Swamper Bill was leading the rig away. McCracken's hand came down on Swamper Bill's shoulder. "Come on, talk."

The man's grip was like a beartrap. But Swamper Bill said, "Mrs. Campbell told me about their oats field."

"My sheep et it down."

"You admit it?"

"I do."

Swamper Bill said, "Damn that cheap, guttersnipe of a deputy, anyway!"

Lureman said, "He knows who butters his bread."

McCracken gave Swamper Bill a push that sent him into the dust. McCracken said, "Get wise, fella, get wise. Them farmers ain't buyin' whiskey at the Golconda. Get wise, fella."

McCracken stood with his thick legs wide, looking down on him. Peck Lureman's whiskery lips showed a faint smile. Swamper Bill got to his feet, and he hoped he was hiding his hate. "Don't need to get so rough, McCracken."

"All in fun," McCracken returned. "All in fun, Swamper Bill. Maybe I don't know how strong I am." He laughed at that, like it was funny.

Lureman said, "Me to git a shave an' haircut an' bath fer the doin's tonight. Where'll you be, McCracken?"

McCracken jerked a thumb toward the Golconda. He looked at Swamper Bill, who was leading the team away. Lureman went across the street, heavy boots moving the dust, and went into the barbershop. McCracken went into the Golconda.

WITH THE help of the livery-barn hostler, Swamper Bill unhitched the Circle team, and the swamper led the broncs into stalls. When the swamper returned to his saloon McCracken was at the bar.

McCracken said, "A shot of hooch Swamper Bill?"

"No."

"Why not? You quit drinkin'?"

Shanty came in with, "Sure, he done signed the pledge. I inked the pen for him, McCracken; never knew he could write that good, though."

But McCracken cut through this with, "Why?"

For a moment Swamper Bill let his temper run away with him. "McCracken, you push me any further an' I'll kill you! I mean jes' that, fella. I'm no farmer! I don't run. Take that in your pipe an' smoke it!"

"A little dust don't hurt no man," McCracken claimed.

"It hurt me—" Behind McCracken Swamper Bill saw Shanty shake his head slowly. The swamper caught his temper with a spade-bit; he got his broom and went outside and swept the sidewalk again.

Grocer Williams came out of the General Store and said, "It's got all the earmarks of hell, Swamper Bill. I notice both McCracken and Lureman is armed."

"You talk a lot, Williams, but you don't do a damn' thing. Do me the favor of gettin' outa my sight, will you?"

Williams shrugged, returned to his store. Swamper Bill swept until his anger had become replaced by logic. He stuck his broom between the outer door and the inner door of the Golconda and went to the livery barn, for he had seen a rider just ride into the barn. He had been right; the rider was young Mike Campbell.

Campbell stripped his gear from his bronc, pulling the latigo out of the ring with a savage hardness. He threw the saddle on the rack and hung his bridle around the horn and said to the hostler, "Grain him good. He's had a hard ride from Center City."

The horse showed it, too. Lather on him, and his shoulder-muscles trembled, and he stood with the lazy tiredness that comes from many miles.

"I watered him back on Beaver Crick," the young farmer said. "He don't need no water then until—"

Mike Campbell stopped speaking and Swamper Bill noticed that the farmer was looking at the team the Circle sheepmen had driven into town.

"So them two dogs are in town, huh?" He did not await an answer. "I kind of figured they'd come in. Comin' over from Center City I seen a rider an' pack-horse in the distance, an' my glasses made out the man was this deputy, Joe Berry. Was I right, Swamper Bill?"

Swamper Bill admitted that the farmer was right. Mike Campbell cursed the deputy with a slow monotony.

"Runnin' out, huh? Always figured he worked for Lureman and Mc-

Cracken. Bet he had their dinero in his pocket when he skeedaddled."

"Good riddance," Swamper Bill said. "Sit down an' chaw the rag a little, Mike?"

"No can do; not enough time."

"You got plenty of time," Swamper Bill corrected. "I was talkin' to Brenda when she was in town this morning."

MIKE CAMPBELL said, "I'd best settle down a little. I stopped in at my farm, an' that oats field—" He looked out the door at the main street of Elkhorn. "Lord, it's tromped down, et to the ground. Them danged sheep nibble right to the soil an' miss nothing."

"Wires cut, or pulled down?"

"Cut smack off. Looks to me like wire-cutters did it. They're brave, them two: who else but them would cut those wires? Nobody. They want me out 'cause I'm leader of them two other farmers."

"Did you talk with Morehead an' Giddens?"

"They're yeller, Swamper Bill. "They won't ride with me, them two hellions. Yeller to the core."

"Maybe sensible," Swamper Bill corrected.

Mike Campbell snorted. "Sensible, huh? They ain't even got sense enough to savvy that if them sheepmen can cut my fences and destroy my crops, them sheepmen can do the same to them. They don't seem to understand that this range ain't got no law."

"There's the sheriff, over at Center City," Swamper Bill pointed out. "Why not notify him an' get him over here?"

"He's for the sheepmen, an' you know it."

Swamper Bill did not agree to that. Sheriff Wad Sheffler was an honest man, he figured, and he told Campbell this.

"He'd look at my fence, see where it was cut, look at the hoof-marks of them wollies, talk with Lureman an' McCracken a spell, take a drink with them, then ride back to Center City. Case closed, no evidence pointin' nowhere—that'd be his ver-

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dict. You know that as well as I do."

"All right, Mike—what do you aim to do then?"

There it was, put right up to him. But there was no evasion on the part of Mike Campbell. He was confiding in a friend, and he knew it. "Call them two sheepmen, Swamper Bill."

"They're both armed, Mike; that'll be two against one. One against one would be big enough odds, for both of them have had a number of gunfights and come through."

"I'll pull through."

Swamper Bill said, "Odd thing, the way a man thinks. Whenever bullets sing, it's always the other guy that's goin' get killed, not himself. That's the way it was back at Shiloh an' Richmond."

"You never got killed," the young granger pointed out.

"I was lucky," Swamper Bill said, "an' I was damned lucky."

Campbell bit his lip, looking out the door. Swamper Bill was accomplishing his purpose: quiet the youth down; get logic to take the place of anger; calm his blood.

But then the boyish face of Mike Campbell hardened into severe masculinity. "Nope, nobody's talkin' me outa this, Swamper Bill. I 'preciate what you say, but—"

"What about Brenda, an' little Louise?"

The youth's face suddenly showed an inner sickness. For a moment the old swamper thought he had won and he tasted the bright taste of victory...too early. Brenda and her little daughter had been his ace card; now he realized he had played it, and still lost.

For the face of young Mike Campbell showed that old hardness again. And Swamper Bill Roser got the impression that the young man had already fought this problem through and had come out with a solution. "I think, Swamper Bill, that my daughter would rather have a dead father than to have a coward to raise her."

"That goes good in books an' stories," Swamper Bill grumbled, "but it don't play out so strong in real life."

"I can't run."

There it was, simple and concrete. A man worked for an ideal; he worked hard, and he couldn't forsake it because of fear. Maybe it was best that way, and Swamper Bill Roser remembered a hard hand pushing him; he remembered the dust of the street, and its taste to his tongue and nostrils.

Back on the street, somebody had snickered; he could still hear the sound. It was one thing to insult a man, and another to insult him in front of the town—and the people —where he lived.

"Think it over a while, Mike."

"I've thought it over for days."

"Thirty minutes?"

Mike Campbell smiled. "Thirty minutes, then, Swamper Bill." He amended his statement to, "Unless they push me into trouble before that time."

"All right."

CAMPBELL went to the General Store, and Swamper Bill went to the Golconda. Lureman must have still been in the barber shop, for Barney McCracken was alone in the saloon. "Done reckon Mike Campbell rid into town," McCracken said.

"How would I know?" Swamper Bill parried.

"Done saw you hike toward the livery-stable to talk with him," McCracken said. "If you got the sense I figger you have, swamper, you'll stay outa this, savvy."

"You warnin' me?"

"I'm warnin' you."

Swamper Bill said, "Why should I get into it, McCracken? Your sheep never ate down no oat-field of mine."

"That's good."

But it wasn't good; both of them knew that. A hard fist had come out, a man had rolled in dust, and back on the sidewalk a man had snickered. It wasn't so much what a beating a man gave another man's body. Flesh and blood will heal with time, but when you beat another man to the dust you beat his spirit; and only revenge can restore a man's pride.

"No business of mine, McCracken."

Shanty O'Brien said, "That's the sensible talk, Swamper Bill," but McCracken did not see the big Irishman's wink. Shanty jerked his head a little, and Swamper Bill saw one of the rifles had been moved from its rack behind the bar. "Good talk," the Irishman repeated.

Swamper Bill went to the back and entered the store-room. Here was the smell of beer and he found the rifle on the hooks. He levered it back a little, saw the brass rim, then locked the breech.

He thought, *You're doin' this because of the fact that he knocked you down,* and he knew that wasn't true. He knew that his mind was just making up that alibi for motivation.

Was he doing it for Mike Campbell?

Yes, in a way—a distant way, though. Then for whom was he doing this? He knew that answer readily. He was doing this for little Louise, and he was doing this for Brenda.

You're a danged fool, he told himself. *A bullet can kill a man, even if he has dodged them at Gettysburg.*"

They're not related to you, he repeated.

But hadn't he eaten at their table; hadn't he played with little Louise, tossing her and tickling her; hadn't her laughter been good?

They had invited him, a swamper, into their home; and, for a brief period, they had made him forget the miserableness of it all, of the thoughts that kept coming back and back and back.

Who else had invited him to dine with them?

Shanty O'Brien, but Shanty was a bachelor, batching in a cabin on the edge of town... Nobody else had invited him. He kept remembering how Brenda had looked at Mike, like she was so happy she and he were married and making a home, and that had made him remember his wife, and the way she used to look at him.

Swamper Bill came through the alley, and saw that Barney McCracken had left the Golconda. The sheep-

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man stood on the concrete in front of the saloon. Even as Swamper Bill Roser watched, young Mike Campbell came out of the store. He looked at McCracken, and McCracken looked at the farmer.

Both were silent, and then Mike Campbell cursed the sheepman. Mike Campbell's voice was controlled, and the oaths moved off his tongue.

Each curse, Swamper Bill realized, was true.

McCracken said, "You talk big."

"I can back it, too."

McCRACKEN kept watching young Mike. So far McCracken had not seen Swamper Bill standing beside The General Store, holding his rifle.

McCracken showed what was supposed to be a smile. He called, "Peck Lureman! Oh, Peck!"

Lureman came out of the barbershop, hand on his holstered gun. He wore a white apron and lather covered his lower jaw.

His voice was cynical. "Damn it, McCracken, why didn't you put this off until I got my shave?"

"He's pushin' me."

Peck Lureman stopped. He did not look at McCracken; he did not watch young Mike. He was looking at Swamper Bill.

"You in on this, Bill?"

"I'm takin' a hand."

Swamper Bill realized he was deadly afraid. It had been the same at Shiloh and those other scattered points. But always his fear had left before the shattering impact of violence.

McCracken said, "You take the swamper, Lureman!" His voice was high and feverish. McCracken pulled his gun. He beat young Mike.

Mike Campbell went back and fell to one knee. Swamper Bill had lost his fear now. His rifle came up fast and sights fell into line and he was almost looking into Peck Lureman's pistol.

Lureman was taking no chances on a swift shot. No wild shooting from the hip for him; he would use his sights and be sure. Their guns talked. Then Lureman was holding his right arm and hollering. "Don't shoot again! Mt arm—it's busted—my gun is down—"

Lureman's words pierced the wild talk of the wild guns.

Swamper Bill swung his Winchester. But McCracken was flat on his belly with the concrete growing red under him. Mike Campbell was still on one knee.

Lureman kept on hollering.

Shanty O'Brien ran out of the Golconda. He slammed Lureman across the mouth and knocked him down.

"You've yelled long enough, you idiot!"

Others ran onto the street.

They took Lureman and Mike to Doc's office, where they found Lureman to have a broken arm and where it was discovered that Mike had three broken ribs. But they took McCracken to the morgue behind the hardware store.

The sheriff rode in at dusk. He was all business. He held a coroner's court in the hotel lobby. Six good men and true cleared Mike Campbell of a murder charge; then they bound Lureman over to the fall term of court on the charge of attempted murder. The tide had suddenly turned against the sheepmen.

Afterwards, the sheriff and the Campbells and Bill sat on the hotel porch, enjoying the night's coolness. From the town hall came the sounds of the Saturday night dance.

The sheriff said, "Lureman'll be a good monkey from here on out. He's promised that; he was scared stiff. Bill could have killed him.

"I never knew Berry was crooked. Now this town needs a deputy an' I have my mind set on one man."

He was looking at Swamper Bill.

"Shucks, I'm an ol' man, Sheriff."

"This town will be peaceful from now on. You can sit around and draw good wages. Say, that dance is in full swing! What say we look in for a whirl with the ladies, Deputy Bill?"

"Okay, boss."

●

A COFFIN FOR DOGFACE

By RICHARD BRISTER

Dogface Koons ruined his competitors, one after another, until this O'Toole came along. So, everyone was ready to watch O'Toole take the same kind of beating!

"Dogface has imported a passel of gals for his place."

DOGFACE KOONS was what you'd call enterprising. Way I hear it, when the big feller first blowed into Gold Rock he was broke as a sway-backed pack horse. Wangled hisself a small stake off of some damfool greenhorn that'd struck a rich pocket, out to the diggings, bought hisself into a poker game and come out three thousand winners. Some says he never turned the trick entirely honest.

Anyways, he blossoms out pronto in the saloon business, sellin' sour-stomach rotgut in a little shanty out on the east edge of town. Three years

later, he has three saloons, runnin' high, wide, and not-too-handsome; it ain't no use anybody tryin' to compete with him for a share of the miners' boozin' money.

Ever' once in a while some starry-eye pilgrim comes in and tries buckin' Dogface—lasts mebbe two, three months, then hightails it, looking considerable older.

This feller O'Toole come in on a Sunday, give our main stem a good gander, and moseyed into Sam Wetrock's, where I been bartendin' around four in the P.M. Big, strappin' Irisher, with a crooked nose and mebbe two thousand freckles. Come right to the point, he did, with old Wetrock. "Understand you're thinkin' of sellin' out, Wetrock."

The old man looks at him, kind of hungry-eyed, but tryin' to hide it. "Where'd you hear it?"

"Down in one of Koons' places."

This is the kind of underhanded dig in the ribs Dogface Koons amuses hisself with. Underpricin' Wetrock till his back's to the wall, then sendin' a new sucker around to mebbe take the useless real estate off his hands.

"Might sell," grumbles Wetrock. "Price'd have to be right, though. This is a good location, solid built. Got a pump out back there. Clean runnin' water, under shelter." He looks up, kind of studying the strapping young Irisher. "What business was you thinking of going in, O'Toole?"

"Saloon," says O'Toole, never batting an eyelash.

I notice the old man don't make no great effort to warn him again' buckin' Dogface. "Well, in that case, you'd probably be interested in buyin' the stock, too. Got about a thousand in bottled goods on hand here, by my last inventory... How much did you figure on, O'Toole?"

"You're sellin'," says O'Toole. "How much are you askin'?"

"Five thousand, for the whole shebang," says the old man, peering up at the big feller.

"I'll give you three," says O'Toole, grinning.

"What?" hollers Wetrock. I reckon he was figuring on the Irish being easy marks, and O'Toole took some wind out of him, sudden.

"Three," says O'Toole.

"That's plain idiotic," howls Wetrock. "Stock and runnin' water alone's worth that much. You try to build for yourself in this town, young feller, and you'll find out—"

"Three's my top offer," says O'Toole. "I'll be around town, Wetrock, in case you want to confab." He rearranges them freckles as his face cracks in another big grin. "Wouldn't wait too long, if I was you; I might get nervous and decide to lower my offer."

He walks out, cool as spring water out of the foot of Panamint Mountain.

The old man looks at me, sour. "He knows something, Uncle Billy. Fetch him back; I got no choice but to take his offer. Blast that Dogface. He's ruined me, just like he'll ruin that crazy young pilgrim."

SO THAT'S how come Michael Terance O'Toole becomes a saloonman in Gold Rock. He keeps me on as bartender, same wages as I drawed under Wetrock, and under Silas Peabody before him.

Dogface Koons blows in on us that first night. Him and O'Toole kind of eyes each other over, like a couple of fighting cocks squaring off, before digging the spurs into each other. "Well, kid," says Dogface, "how's business so far?"

He's a big, blocky-built feller with a face like a bulldog, red-headed, with mean little gray-green eyes. They ain't nothing he likes better then makin' a dunce out of somebody, which is clearly showed by his openin' remark. They ain't no business in O'Toole's place, and O'Toole throws a frown at him.

"Slow," he says. "It'll pick up, I figure."

Dogface rears back on his big legs and leaves out a belly laugh. "Will it?" he says. "And how're you fixin' to grab any trade away from my three places, O'Toole?"

"Don't reckon that concerns nobody but me," O'Toole says.

They's something bland and kind of self-assured in his manner towards Dogface. He don't knuckle down, like most everybody else knuckles down to Dogface in these diggings. Dogface plainly don't like O'Toole's gumption.

"Kid," he says. "I'll pass out a friendly little warning to you, like I passed out to them other fellers that figured to set up a saloon here and cut me loose from some of my trade. There ain't a chance for you. I can price you right out of business, any time I take the notion. I got my good will established, over three years now. You ain't got no more show buckin' me than a mouse has buckin' a cat."

"You hit yourself on your chest any harder," says O'Toole, "and you'll cave your ribs in, Koons."

I give out with a nervous giggle from back of the bar. Dogface Koons lets out a growl and puts a hand on the ivory butt of one of his sixguns. "Son," he rumbles, "it's plain you're new to this part of the country. You're gettin' just too sassy."

I ain't goin' to write down all his words, on account of they couldn't be printed. Dogface has a mighty foul manner of cussin', even for a gold camp.

O'Toole says, "Get out of here, Koons."

"What?"

"Get out. I'm runnin' a respectable place here; there's no room for that kind of talk in my place. Now get out."

"Why, you young nitwit, you ain't even armed. You can't—"

"I warned you, Koons," says O'Toole, and he walks toward Dogface, who snaps out his sixgun and points it right at him.

"Put it down," says O'Toole in a level voice; "you're not goin' to use it."

"Why ain't I?"

"You're not ready for that yet. Uncle Billy's standin' there behind that bar for a witness. Put the gun down and I'll throw you out with my hands, Koons."

I can see Dogface Koons turning that over, careful, in his ugly big head. He outweighs the Irisher, and there ain't many tricks he don't savvy, when it comes to a rough-and-tumble. He sets his gun down atop of the bar, and comes in at O'Toole, crouching, his hammy arms out.

O'TOOLE SHOVES a long left hand in his dog face, then slams a right in his big beer belly. Dogface backs up to the wall, grunting some. He puts his head down and runs at O'Toole, meaning to butt him. O'Toole sidesteps, neat as you please, and shoves his booted leg out under the other man's plunging feet.

Dogface slams down hard, hits the footrail with his head, and leaves out a groan, then lays there, kind of dizzy. Without that footrail he would of been up fast, making a real knock-'em-down-drag-'em-out battle out of it.

O'Toole appears to realize it. "Reckon I win on luck this time, Uncle Billy," he grins at me. He shoves the sixgun back in the holster Dogface is wearing against his right thigh, then drags his man out on the boardwalk, and props him up against the side of the building.

There ain't an eye on the stem misses seeing what he is doing, naturally. When he comes back in, I say to him, "Son, that's a mighty vain man you just set up out there for folks to heehaw at. Dogface ain't goin' to appreciate that, when he comes around to his senses and finds folks laughing at him."

"It's a new form of advertisin'," grins O'Toole.

"It's a new way of comitting business suicide," I throw back at him.

DOGFACE KOONS now declares open warfare on O'Toole, and his openin' gun pops off the next night, in the shape of three big town loafers that Dogface had filled with free booze down in his Pothole and sent up to our place. These fellers come in full of steam and loud talk, and their talk ain't just pretty to bend an ear to. If every other word that drips off their dirty tongues ain't a cussword, I'm a frog's uncle.

O'Toole listens to them for exact-

ly one minute, by his big fat railroader's watch, then he lays it down to them. "All right," he says. "It's plain enough who sent you boys up here. This is a decent bar, and that's how I mean to keep it. If you three ain't goin' to mind your talk and your manners, I'll ask you to leave."

He has about four, five other customers in the place, and they're watchin' the play, real interested.

One of them loafers, the biggest of 'em, says, "Mebbe we don't feel jest like leavin' yet, mister."

O'Toole goes over to him, makes a pass at his face, ducks around in back of him, and catches hold of the big drunken fool by the nape of his neck and the seat of his California britches. He turkey-walks his man out to the board walk, then boots him into the gutter. He comes back through the batwings, breathing pure fire, and glares at them two others.

"Scat!" he goes at them, and mister, them two skedaddle. Them customers stand there gazing on O'Toole in mute admiration.

"First time I seen a saloonman that done his own bouncin'," says one of them. "That on the level, O'Toole?" he goes on. "You figurin' on clampin' the lid down on cussin' in here?"

"I already clamped it," says O'Toole. "My daddy run a fine, clean, respectable saloon on the south side of Boston and I figure to run this place the same way. Tomorrow," he says, "me and Uncle Billy are goin' to give this place a thorough housecleanin' that'll make the Pennsylvania Dutch look like pikers. We're gona hang pictures on the wall and in back of the bar. We're gonna dress her up neat as a pin, and real pretty."

"What for, in tarnation?" says somebody.

"What this camp needs," says O'Toole, measuring his words out real thoughtful, "is a quiet, respectable place where a man can come in and have a peaceful drink and mebbe a little palaver, without a bunch of rowdies swearing and fighting and staggering against him. That's the kind of atmosphere you can expect to find in here from now on, boys. And I'll be obliged if you'll sort of pass the word around for me."

"Why, son," says one of them customers, "that'd be some trick, if you could turn it. Yes, sir, they's plenty men in this camp that hanker for a place like that. But this ain't Boston, Mass. Not by a long shot. And Dogface Koons ain't going to stand around idle, whilst you're—"

"Dogface Koons," says O'Toole, "doesn't worry me any."

WELL, SIR, I ain't work-shy, but I'll confess I was about ready to keel over toward the close of business that next night. We'd give her a cleanin', like O'Toole promised, and I reckon she was about as clean a barroom as you'd find this side of Frisco, for a fact. Them pictures O'Toole'd promised was up in back of the bar, and along the back wall. He'd bought 'em off Pierce, at the mercantile, and they wasn't no naked women, but nature scenes, and pictures of railroads, and suchlike mind-improvers.

"Don't want nothing hanging on my walls," says O'Toole, "that a decent man wouldn't be willing to hang in his front parlor, in front of his women and children... Uncle Billy," he says, "from now on, I want you to keep a big bucket of water in back of that bar, and clean those glasses between customers."

"Why," I yelp, "that ain't practical, son. Wouldn't have no time for waitin' on trade, was I to try what you're suggestin'. Ain't a barroom in this part of the country bothers washin' out glasses, except once a day, after closin', or before openin' up in the mornings."

"That," says O'Toole, "is just why we're gonna do it... And quit scowlin' at me; if you can't keep up with it, I'll spell you, or hire you an assistant."

The better part of a week, O'Toole works like a beaver kind of decoratin' his place up. 'Pears like there's a touch of the artist in the big Irisher from Boston; it turns out real homelike and invitin', the more he works on it. First thing you know, the min-

ers are troupin' in to have a quick look-see. They're noticin' how I wash them glasses; they're noticin' O'Toole don't sell nothing but the better brands of bar whiskey; they ain't having themselves just a look-see, they're stayin' the evenin'.

Comes the end of the week and O'Toole's broke about even, which is good, considerin' what he's laid out for paint and all them decorations. Dogface Koons ain't been heard from, however, and I ain't turning no handsprings yet.

"Son," I tell O'Toole, "you've throwed a hard punch at him. He couldn't run nothing but a rowdy slum-joint to save himself, bein' a rowdy by nature. But he ain't gonna take this lyin' down."

Which Dogface don't. He commences to cut his price on bar whiskey from two bits a shot down to fifteen cents. Which he can't do, and turn no profit. They's some folks in town that are hard up enough to take the bait, and swing over their trade from the "decent joint," as the miners have dubbed O'Toole's place, comical like. But the ones that do are mostly the loafers and riffraff, that ain't much for workin' and can't afford to turn down a chance to save money.

ME AND O'Toole are takin' the sun out front of the place, ten-thirty one A. M. Along comes Dogface.

"Well," he grins, "how long you figure you can stand up against me, young feller?" He says it real sarcastic and mean-like.

"You mean on account of this price war you're wagin' against me?" says O'Toole.

"That's what."

O'Toole throws his freckled head back and guffaws. "Man," he says, "you're doin' me a big favor. I'd of had to throw the riffraff out of my place with my bare hands, but you saved me the trouble. I'm gettin' all the best element in my place, these last few days. I'm thanking you for it."

"You won't be thankin' me long," growls Dogface, and stalks off down the boardwalk.

He lines out of town about an hour later, heading up towards Frisco. He don't come back until Saturday, and they's a big, handsome blonde hussy with him. Saturday night, he springs his surprise on the miners. Somehow or other he'd lined up a trio of musicians, from among the miners that was tired of growin' calluses on their hands. It was just a guitar and two fiddles, but they made pretty fair music, and that big blonde hussy Dogface had rode in with from Frisco turned out to be a professional singer.

Life gets pretty boring in these gold camps. They hadn't been no entertainment offered in Dogface's saloons up to now, because Dogface hadn't seen no need to provide it. He was separating the miners from their pokes without it.

Consequently, when the news spreads around camp that there's a pretty blonde woman airing her tonsils up in the Pothole, our place empties faster than it might of if Billy, The Kid and Tilghman was usin' it for a shootout.

"Well," I says to O'Toole, "I told you he wasn't goin' to set idle. Now what?"

O'Toole grins. "Hold the fort, Uncle Billy," he says, and heads out the batwings.

"Where you goin', son?"

"Been expectin' somethin' like this," he says. "I got a card or two up my sleeve yet... Tell anybody that sticks his nose in the door to stick around. We're goin' to provide some entertainment ourselves."

Well, sir, a couple of customers does wander in, and I tell 'em what O'Toole told me to tell 'em. By the time he gets back, there's a pretty good bunch in the place, curious to see how he figures to match the Sunday punch Dogface has throwed at him.

Dang' if that crazy young Irisher don't barge into the place carryin' one of them fancy squeeze boxes, accor-deens, I hear somebody call it.

"Boys," he says, "I used to be kind of handy with this rig, when I

was playin' and singin' for the trade back in my pop's place, in Boston. You'll excuse me, if I seem a mite rusty. Long time since I gave her any kind of a workout... What'll you have?"

"You mean," says a customer, "you can play and sing any song we care to ask for?"

"Time was," says O'Toole, "when I knowed upwards of five hundred songs. I may have to dub in some on the words, but I don't figure the tunes have got away from me... Try me on one, pardner."

The customer grins, fingering his stubble. "Play *The Dixie Dandy*, O'Toole."

O'TOOLE GIVES out a few warmin' up chords on that squeeze box, then launches into it. I never heard it before, but it's a nice bouncy tune that kind of lifts up your spirits, especially when O'Toole opens his mouth and cuts loose on the words in as pretty a barytone as I heard since I left civilization.

When he finishes, that customer looks at him kind of misty-eyed. "Son," he says, "I thank you. I thank you very kindly. Ain't heard that song since I left the home diggings in Georgia. Makes a man soft inside, it does, hearin' his favorite song played way out here in the middle of nowhere.... Can you play 'Marchin' Through Georgia'?"

"Let's have a request from somebody else first," says O'Toole, diplomatic. "Must be a lot of gents here that hanker to hear some particular song played."

Which there sure are. They keep him busy the best part of an hour, when he finally has to throw his hands up and beg off for a recess to rest his weary throat muscles. By that time, we're playin' to standin' room only. When O'Toole finally calls a halt for the night, we're richer by five hundred dollars.

I look at him, dumbfounded, also bone-weary. "Son, I can't understand it. Never figured to see the day when an accordeen and a man singer would outdraw a good-lookin' blonde woman in a gold rush camp. It don't seem to make no sense, any way you look at it."

"You ever stop to consider, Uncle Billy, that most of the men stuck out here in Gold Rock are plenty homesick. Most of the numbers they asked me to sing and play for them was songs that carried them right back to the part of this country they hail from, if you'll notice." He grins. "I guess we trumped Dogface's ace, all right."

"Mebbe. It still don't figure." I tell him. "Women is still a mighty strong draw back in these hills. When a man ain't laid eyes on a pretty gal in the better part of a year, he gets a mighty itch in him."

I reckon mebbe Dogface's mind was working the same way mine was. The next week he come up with another Sunday punch in the shape of a half dozen dancin' partners, that he kept shunting from one of his three saloons to the other, all evenin'.

Listenin' to a good-lookin' blonde gal sing, and gettin' a chance to dance with a lady, and mebbe hug her up some while you're at it, is two different things. Them honkeytonk hussies of Dogface's was bound to reach our camp, sooner or later. O'Toole'd just forced Dogface to make the move sooner than he naturally would of.

And they drawed the trade into his places like sugar draws flies. O'Toole set his accordeen up on a shelf, back of the counter, which was all it was good for, now the trade had all shifted back to Dogface.

"Son," I said, "what you figure to do?"

"Dunno yet," he says, kind of down-mouthed. "Gotta think, Uncle Billy."

"They ain't much you can do, boy," I tell him. "Give him card for card. Take yourself a trip out to civilization and haul in some honkeytonk gals of your own. Preferably real good to look at, and not too standoffish."

His mouth tightens. "This is a respectable place. I won't lower my standards just because Dogface Koons has."

"Son, you won't eat, neither, unless you—"

"There oughtta be a way," he says, "to trump his ace again, without cheapenin' my place. A town needs one decent saloon, Uncle Billy. My pop used to say a decent saloon was as necessary to the growth and well-being of any town as a good church. This place is gonna stay decent."

"Son, they ain't another card you can play. It'll take a small earthquake or a flood to roust them miners out of Dogface's dives, away from them no-account females."

"A flood," says O'Toole, kind of thoughtful. "You might've given me an idea there, Uncle Billy."

HE DON'T spill what's on his mind, but Monday, he hires Sim Daniel's wagon and team and drives out of the diggings, tellin' me to hold down the fort a couple, three days till he gets back.

He don't come back until Saturday afternoon, late, and he makes quite an entrance, I'll tell you. There is a big, pine board coffin setting in the back of the wagon, and wrote out on the coffin, in big black paint lettering, is a name: *Dogface Koons.*

Dogface, like I say, is a big man in these diggings, and for the pilgrim to drive down our main stem with that big coffin, raises a lot of guffaws, and takes nerve. O'Toole'd just drove up outside his saloon when Dogface comes stormin' down the boardwalk, mad as a hornet.

"What kind of a josh you think you're pulling off here, O'Toole?" he rumbles.

O'Toole grins at him, bland. "I'm not busting any law that I know of," he offers.

"I'm gonna bust me a jaw that I know of," says Dogface, "unless you get that thing out of sight pronto."

"I mean to," grins O'Toole, and grins toward some idlers. "How about it, boys? One free drink to pall bearers."

Dogface glares, but them idlers is thirsty, and the drink baits them to lift that coffin off the wagon and tote her inside.

"What you got in there?" growls Dogface, noticin' how they strain when they lift her.

"Goose feathers, maybe," O'Toole says, and turns his back on Dogface Koons. The onlookers leave out with a couple, few heehaws, and Dogface stomps off, his big head wagging, disgusted.

"Any damn fool that'll waste his time and good money on such nonsense don't worry me none with his competition," he mutters.

The whole diggings is curious about what O'Toole's brung to camp in that outsized coffin, but he don't spring his surprise until around eight in the P. M. I help him pry the lid off her, and stare down, flabbergasted.

"What in the name of sin, son. It's a bathtub, ain't it?"

"It is," says O'Toole. "Galvanized iron. First one in these diggings, according to my information."

"But what's the idee, boy?"

"The idea," O'Toole says, "is that pocket miners get mighty dirty workin' their claims. I reckon I could charge two, three dollars for a bath, and get it easy. But I ain't going to do it. I'm settin' this tub out back there under that pump, and providin' baths to the boys as a public service. Of course, there's a wrinkle."

"A wrinkle?"

"They've got to have three drinks at the bar before they rate a bath. You can hand out bath chips to them Uncle Billy, when they've drunk the bath quota."

I throw my hands up. "Bartendin' appears to be gettin' all-fired complicated... You figure this'll outdraw Dogface's dancin' girls, son? If you do, you're plain crazy."

"Wait and see, Uncle Billy."

WHICH IT works out kind of amusing. O'Toole had figured right on one thing. That bathtub done land-office business. They was squabblin' and fussin' about who was to get the first cracks at her. I pretty near wore my arm out, pumpin' well water up into that tub, until O'Toole made a ruling. Every man had to

pump his own water, and clean her out for the next feller.

But as soon as they'd drunk their three and got cleaned up, they beelined down to Dogface's Pothole and them dancin' partners.

Pretty soon Dogface come up the street, fuming. "What you tryin' to do, O'Toole?" he rumbles. "Start a riot?"

"Nothin' like it," says O'Toole. "What's your trouble?"

"My girls is refusin' to dance with a man that ain't had a bath recent."

"Can't say I blame 'em," O'Toole offers. "Some of these boys who ain't had a bath in a month or three, are mighty ripe, when you get too close to 'em."

Dogface says somethin' I won't repeat, and adds, "the girls never made any fuss till you put in the bathtub."

"Watch your language," snaps out O'Toole. "There's a sign over my bar there says: 'No cussing!' in case you haven't noticed."

Dogface gnashes his ugly teeth, and cut loose again. "I ain't goin' to watch nothing. Next thing, they's goin' to be a small war down in my Pothole, between the boys that've washed up and the ones the girls is refusin' to dance with."

"I told you to stop cussing," grits O'Toole. "I'm runnin' a respectable place."

Dogface snaps out some recommendations for O'Toole's respectable place. "Give your hardware to somebody to hold for you," suggests O'Toole. "Come out in the street with me and repeat that."

Dogface is that close to the end of his patience, which there never was much of it, that he takes O'Toole up on the challenge. They get out there in the street, with nothing but the moonlight to show 'em what they're doing, and take up where they left off that first day.

O'Toole fights with his fists, snaking them out into Dogface's eyes and against his beer belly, real tricky. The big man keeps tryin' to close in, and get his hammy hands on the young feller from Boston.

They's a big crowd watchin', and Dogface don't dare get too dirty on the in-fighting, but once I see him try to knee O'Toole in the groin, when O'Toole leaves hisself open for it.

IT IS THE first and only time I see the Irisher lose his temper complete. He hauls off with a right and clops Dogface on the ear. The big feller lets out a roar, grabs a hold of O'Toole by his red hair, and tries to snatch it out by the roots.

O'Toole drums away with both fists, into Dogface's beer belly. The big man leaves out a series of pig grunts, and you can see him wilting down under the tattooing. He lets go of O'Toole's hair and wraps them giant arms around the Bostoner, trying to squeeze the air out of him.

I seen Dogface bust a man's ribs in, once, with that kind of pressure. But them punches in the stomach have took some strength out of him. O'Toole wedges an elbow between, and gouges loose from Dogface. He brings a right hand up, short but heavy as a blacksmith sledging a horse shoe into shape on an anvil.

Dogface goes back on his heels, kind of dizzy. O'Toole cuffs him another in the beer belly. Dogface is suddenly very sick, sprawling on hands and knees in the dirt. O'Toole sees there ain't no more fight in the man. He goes through the crowd, and fetches a dipper of well water out of the back of our place, and offers it to Dogface.

The big man is that choked up and miserable that he don't know how to refuse it.

"Koons," says O'Toole, still puffing some, "I guess it's time you and me came to an understanding. I been sayin,' ever since I blew into these diggings, that we needed at least one respectable saloon. I think I've provided one for the boys. I never said, if you'll think back, that there wasn't a place for your kind of a saloon."

"Well," says Dogface, "I'll admit that."

"There's a percentage of men," says O'Toole, "that don't know how

or when to stop drinking. It'll suit me just fine, if they want to start their sprees off with three drinks and a bath up in my place, and then carry the rest of their thirst down to one of your places."

"You ain't anxious to get rich, are you?" says Dogface.

"I don't want drunken money," says O'Toole. "I guess we'll both make out all right, if we can quit cross-purposin' each other."

Them onlookers are nodding their heads, seeing the reasonableness of it. Kind of nice, they're murmuring, to have a quiet saloon and a couple, three more excitin' places in town at the same time. Gives a man a choice how he chooses to entertain hisself of an evening.

Dogface seen how the wind was blowing. He h'ists hisself up and puts his hand out towards O'Toole, grinning sheepish. "I reckon we got no real quarrel," he says.

I'm standing there shakin' my head. It don't make sense, somehow him knucklin' down to the Irisher so sudden, in front of them onlookers. He tips his hand.

"They's a favor I'd like to ask," he says, still sheepish.

"Go ahead," O'Toole says.

"Gimme a shot at that bathtub inside there."

"Sure, after you've drunk three slugs of my whiskey," says O'Toole, grinning at the irony of it.

We never learnt till the next day how come Dogface was so sheepish about it. He'd gone sweet on the big, good-lookin' blonde singer he'd brung in from Frisco. She'd been crinklin' her nose up kind of distasteful, every time he come near her.

●

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FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

The Golden Age of the Cowboy

Fact Feature by JAMES A. HINES

BEEF! BEEF! BEEF! The cry rang over the United States. The buffalo was gone and people needed meat. Thousands of railroad workers still pushing the Iron Horse westward needed meat; the Indians needed meat, their main dependence for food, the buffalo was gone; soldiers needed meat—and beef was the answer to all the cries.

But how were they to get the beef? Texas and Texans were the answer. After the Texans return from the Civil War, they found the wild Longhorn teeming in thousands and thousands over the western ranges. "If you will buy 'em on the hoof, we will push 'em north to Kansas, in spite of hell an' highwater," said the Texans.

In 1867, the town of Abilene, Kansas, sprang up. It was nothing but a cluster of log huts, but Abilene was soon to be the shipping point for thousands of longhorn cattle. A shipping pen was soon built to accommodate 3,000 head of cattle, a large Fairbanks scales was set up, and a office was established.

On the 5th of September, in the year 1867, the first shipment of twenty cars of bellowing, wild-eyed longhorns rode the rails headed for Chicago—the first train-load of cattle to pass over the Kansas-Pacific railroad.

Old-timers said the plan wouldn't work. As one oldster put it: "Hell, think of shippin' thousands of wigglin' bellowin' longhorns as wild as the wildest deers on a railroad train. It can't be done."

But a young railroad promoter had the courage to try, it and the old-timers guessed wrong.

•

YIPEE-E-E! Yipe-e-e-e! The cattle boom was on. This was the Golden Age and the beginning of the Knight on Horseback, the American Cowboy. "Hop along little dogies, git along, for to Kansas we go." This was the era in which the great cattle trails were commenced.

In the year 1867, 35,000 head of cattle made the trip north to Abilene, Kansas. The happy day of the cowboy was on. But although the cowboy had lots of fun on the long trek from Texas to Kansas, it was often a hard and dangerous one.

They drove through bad electric storms, while lightning flashed and balls of fire danced on the horns and backs of the longhorns, and hail beat down out of the skies. Sometimes it hit so hard that the cowboys were forced to take off their kacks and put over their heads for protection. Sometimes the hail hit so hard that it left dents in the saddle which stayed until the saddle was worn out. One old-time cowpuncher remarked: "Them dang dents were still in my kak, when I sold it in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a year later."

There were dangerous stampedes when the lightning flashed and the thunder growled; the cattle went wild with fear. The cowboys rode 'round and 'round the herd trying to keep them quiet by singing to

them. Anything was liable to start them running; a clap of thunder, the light from a lighted cigarette. Sometimes they stampeded in spite of everything the cowboys could do. They ran and ran, racing meat off of their hides. Many and many a cowboy trying to head them and turn the herd about would be trampled to death. After several thousands hoofs had run over the cowboy there was nothing much left of him. His companions would find him the next morning. They would gather his remains, put them in a blanket and bury him in a shallow grave. Another victim of the raw, untamed frontier.

There was always the dangers of raiding bands of Indians, especially when crossing the "Nations" or more known as the Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. And, in addition to all these dangers there were many cattle diseases and dangerous and swollen rivers and streams to cross. In the spring these streams were overflowing; it took experienced cowhands to water a herd and cross it over the stream without losing half of the cattle.

FOR DAYS on the trail there would be no water for the cowboys or cattle; they pushed through heat and dust with red-rimmed eyes, swollen tongues, and parched throats, with nothing to listen to, except the sounds made by bawling, thirsty cattle.

The end of the trail, Abilene, lay in sight across the green prairie of buffalo grass. With its cluster of huts it looked like heaven to the cowboys who had been on the trail for months.

The riders bringing up the drags sweated and cursed as the dust from the thousands of churning hoofs covered them and got into their nose and throat, despite the big bandannas which covered the lower half of their faces. Their shrill yip yip-ee-ee-e could be heard above the thundering hoofs and the bawl of the tired cattle.

A new energy seemed to fill the riders and the cattle also probably sensed it. Abilene with its cluster of log huts also had numerous saloons, honytonks, gambling halls, dance halls, and other kinds of pleasures. With its cattle cars and loading pens strung out along the railroad track, it made a joyful sight to the riders.

As the riders prepared to bed down the herd for the night and with their boss talking with a cattle buyer they were happy. For the lucky ones who did not have to stand night guard would slip in town and celebrate. Yes, this was the end of the trail and each and every cowboy was proud of it.

•

THE bellowing wild longhorns who took the place of the buffalo and

fed the eastern people for a while, opened the great northern ranges of our West.

The era of the longhorn was short-lived. At the close of the Civil War there were thousands and thousands of longhorns on the ranges. In about twenty or twenty-five years the "white-face" or Here-

ford had taken the place of the longhorn.

The Western cattlemen could not be blamed. He wanted cattle with short horns and steers that packed more tender beef and fat and held it. The longhorn was more of an athlete then he was a beef; he was long and rangy and full of angles, built for endurance and speed. He was a lover of personal liberty and was willing to die fighting for it. But if it had not been for the Longhorn the Cattle Industry would never have started; as the buffalo gave away to the longhorn, the longhorn made way for the Hereford bovine.

THERE WERE many trails the cowboys used in bringing their herds north. In 1876, the Panhandle of Texas was first partially stocked. Charles Goodnight entered the Texas Panhandle in 1877. Goodnight had come from Southern Colorado and he located on the Red River, near the head of it with 2200 head of cattle.

By 1880, 222,857 head of cattle were located in that region in spite of all losses due to spring storms and black wolves.

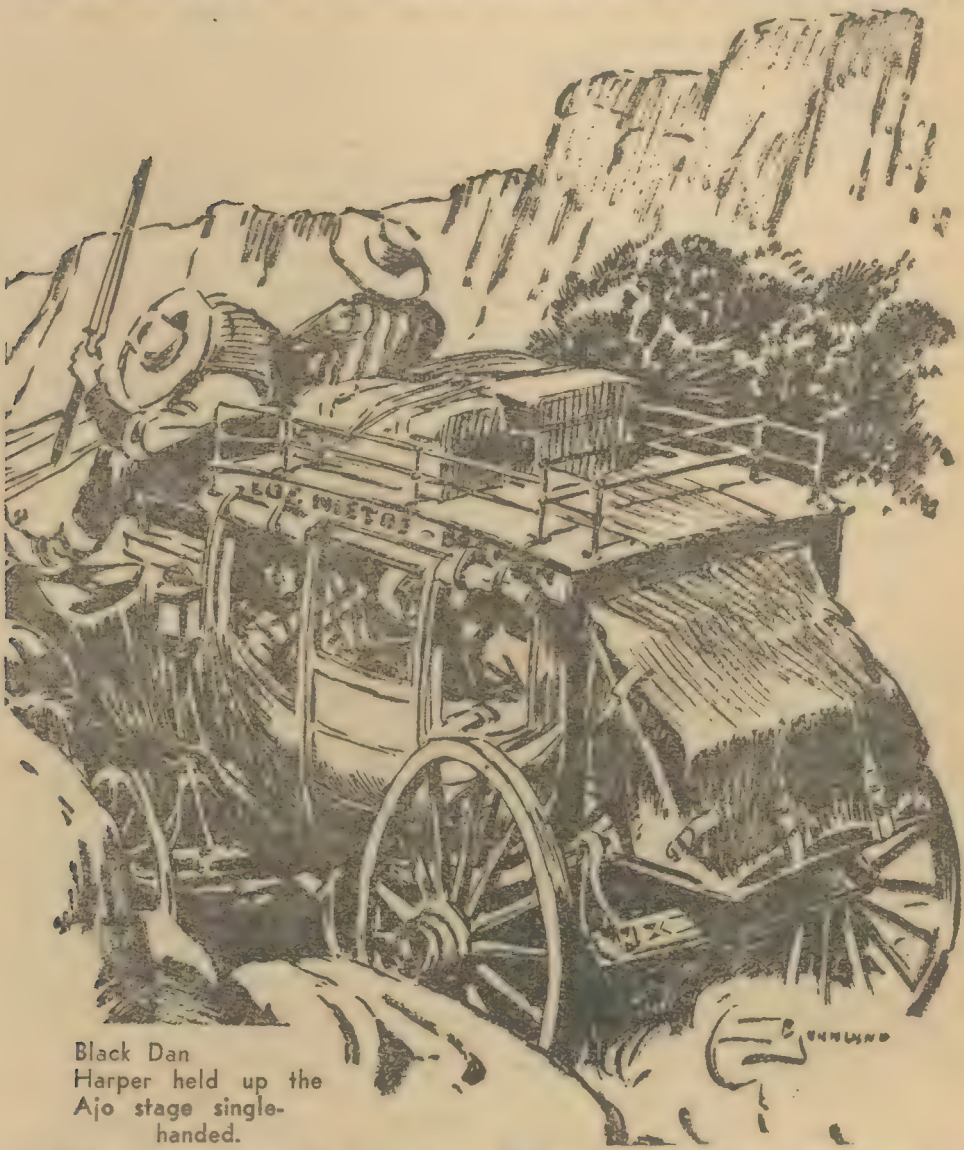
One of the old-time cattle trails began at the Gulf coast of Texas, passing northward, west of San Antonio, thence on northwest to the Red River at Doan's Store in Wilbarger County, Texas. Here it divided into two trails. One trail leading in a north-easterly direction through the Fort Sill reservation in Oklahoma. It crossed the Washita River at Anadarko, Oklahoma, and thence in a northeasterly course crossing the Canadian River on to Abilene, Kansas. The other trail led northward into what is now Beaver County, Oklahoma, and on west to the Colorado ranges.

The Goodnight-Loving Trail started from Fort Concho, running along the Concho River. It crossed the Staked Plains and struck the Pecos River at Horsehead Crossing. From here it followed the Pecos entering New Mexico near Pope Wells. There the trail divided; one trail leading west via El Paso, and on into Arizona, whereas the other trail struck off at the mouth of the Penasco and proceeded west up that stream and followed the divide to Tularosa, and then in a southwesterly direction to Las Cruces, New Mexico. The Chisholm Trail was the most popular of all cattle trails. It was named after a half-breed Cherokee Indian, Jesse Chisholm, who lived near Paris, Texas. The Chisholm Trail ran from the southern part of Texas to the Red River in Cook County. It was first used by a Delaware Indian army scout to guide a troop of soldiers out of the Indian Territory or Nations into Kansas.

There were many great cattle trails, the Shawnee, the Panhandle, the Pecos, the Western, the Bozeman But the Chisholm Trail furnished all the romance and glamour that the radio and movie cowboys are still singing about today.

KILLERS' CARNIVAL

By T. W. FORD



Black Dan Harper held up the Ajo stage single-handed.

They all laughed at Gabby Sheets, the wizened-faced little monkey of a man, who claimed to have known just about every owlhooter who ever lived. But Gabby didn't stop to think about what it might mean when he spouted off to a man who didn't laugh at him!

IT WAS a big day for Valmo, but only Gabby Sheets knew it. And the wizen-face little monkey of a man had ideas about making it bigger. And bloodier...

Gabby was wagging his jaw at the priestly-faced drummer in the stovepipe hat at the Big Ace bar, telling the man some windy about how he

knew Bat Masterson before the famous lawman even had a rep as a gunslinger. Ever since the time he had drifted in to settle down in Valmo two-three years ago, bullet-headed Gabby, with the jutting shoulders on the shrunken body, had been telling those tall ones. About how he knew this or that big-name gunslinger in days past. How he had called famous outlaws by their first names. Anecdotes about like the time he had lent the famous Pistol Herne twenty dollars. And how Kid Eddie always carried, as a luckpiece, the first chunk of lead a sawbones had dug out of his hide. There was usually a little reminiscence or two about famed John Laws.

Of course, after a spell, folks in Valmo got smart and called them so many windies cooked up by Gabby. No hombre could have known so many of the tophand trigger-slammers and owlhooters that danged well. They listened and nodded while Gabby bought the drinks—he seemed to have plenty of dinero, —then laughed behind his back afterwards. Once, when a couple of them had asked him about his dinero, knobby-headed Gabby had grown suddenly reticent and muttered something about an inheritance from a wealthy brother back East.

"Bat always was a calm one, yessiree," he was saying now to the big-eyed drummer, Hatter, "Why he—"

"You knew him, mister?" Hatter asked in that curiously soft voice that still, somehow, had the trick of commanding attention.

Gabby batted his left eye, the one that had the scar twisting down from the outside corner. He signalled the bar boss to set them up again. "Knew him? Like I knew Texas Bob O'Neill. And for an hombre that was wanted in three states, there was a gent who could twang a guitar like—" He broke off.

The batwing doors had been broached to let in a spike of the fierce sunlight from the boiling street. A bony man, as lank as a fence-post, in rusty black, stalked down the spike of yellow and took a chair at a table across the room. He had a thin spike of nose three sizes too big for his emaciated face. It made him look like a crow. "Holy Pete! You know who *that* is?" Gabby said in an excited whisper, clutching at the little drummer's arm.

The latter took a look-see, then shook his head as he brushed at a spot on his immaculate gray coat. He felt of his neat black bow-tie too, a neat precise little man. "No."

"That," Gabby told him impressively, "is Black Dan Harper, the gent who held up the Ajo stage single-handedly that time, got the load of bullion board, then beat two posses to the Border."

Hatter nodded. "I remember. That was some years back."

Gabby Sheets laid a crooked finger alongside his nose as his birdlike eyes blinked rapidly in thought. He made a thin cackling sound. "Say-y, I happen to know Jim Tooker took a room at the Trail Hotel early this morning." Tooker was a reformed outlaw who'd gone straight since coming out of the Big House a few years ago. "Them two's old enemies; hate each other's gizzards like poison. Tangled in two gunfights and—"

The drummer nodded, adjusting the angle of his stove pipe hat in the back mirror. "Heard about that. Well, Harper's probably just passing through and—"

"If Tooker learned he was here... if them two should lock horns again," Gabby mused, snickering. "Hey, Pete," he called the bar boss.

He got a piece of paper from Pete, then went to work laboriously with a stub of pencil. When he finished printing out the message, he signed it, *A Friend,* then wrote, *Mr. Jim Tooker* on the outside after he had folded it up. He snickered some more. "Now I'll just leave this down at the hotel. Be back in a few minutes." He went out the doors at that funny little dog-trot of his.

A LITTLE while later, he came loping back in, a look of triumph on his pinched-up face as he saw Black Dan Harper still there, eating. He rejoined the drummer at

the bar that had only a few customers on the somnolent breathless afternoon. The vagrant puffs of breeze off the prairie were like back-drafts from Hell's own oven. Little Gabby panted as he ordered fresh drinks for them both.

"Hot enough out there to curl a gila monster's tail... But it'll be hotter'n that danged soon," he bragged. "He-he... Reminds me of the day Boy Camber ran hog-wild in Little Rio and..." He was off on another one of his endless reminiscences.

Pete, the drink-wrangler, winked broadly at Hatter as he poured drinks on the house. "Gabby—seems like he knew practically every other trigger slammer what ever busted a cap on a man. Knew 'em like they was his brothers, too. Haw-haw."

But the grave-faced drummer didn't crack a smile; he seemed to be taking in Gabby Sheets' every word eagerly. Seemed impressed watching solemnly as Gabby demonstrated that cross-arm draw of Boy Camber's.

"Yep, that's exactly how he slung that hogleg, Camber," the drummer agreed. "I saw him once. 'Course I never really knew him like you."

Gabby swelled up with importance. "I sure knew Boy all-right. Took more'n one sawbuck off uh him at stud, too. Always could whip him at that game. Same way's I could Chollie Sands," he named another outlaw. "Him and that left-hand dealing of his! Why one night—"

"You're talking through your headpiece! Chollie Sands weren't left-handed no wise!" It was a newcomer, a stranger who'd just ridden in, still knuckling the trail dust out of his eye sockets. A big truculent gent. "Bet a tenner to a dobie dollar you never knew Sands, by grab!"

Gabby wheeled around, eyes angry. "Didn't know Chollie? You a-calling me a liar, pilgrim?" He jabbed a finger down at the .38 seated in the holster on his right thigh. "That's one of Chollie's own hoglegs that he give me as a present once when—well, fer a favor I done him."

The newcomer glanced down at the gun with the butt looped by silver inlaid rings, a beautiful thing. Nodded. "Yep, I'll admit Sands always toted pistols like that. But I still say you're cockeyed—he warn't left-handed!"

Gabby's hand clawed around the fancy gun butt. Once, half orey-eyed he admitted he knew he could whip any ordinary cuss at gunplay but was too smart to go up against a professional trigger slammer. Now, though, he was ready.

But Hatter, the priestly looking drummer, calmly broke up the thing. He stepped half in front of belligerent Gabby, facing the big stranger. "I happen to *know* Chollie Sands was left-handed, I reckon you're plumb outvoted, mister."

That settled it. The big man growled something and turned back to his beer. Hatter turned to Gabby and pushed his hand away from the gun. "Sands slipped across the Border when they had a whole posse watching it for him, didn't he?"

"Sure did, friend. A slick trick." He winked. "I could tell you how—" His eyes went past the drummer to the doorway. A man entering, held held one of the batwings wide a moment as he passed a few words with a friend out on the wooden sidewalk. Through the gap, Gabby had a full view of the rider walking a dust-powdered mare slowly up the road. The man in a white calfskin vest was so stubby he looked like a bare younker in the saddle. The bar of black mustache looked incongruous.

"By dang if that ain't Peaceful Johnson!" Gabby interrupted himself. He trotted over to peer above the doors and follow the rider's progress. "Yep, ol' Peaceful, all right." He came back to the bar, cocked his head to one side thoughtfully. His eyes sidled over to where Black Dan Harper lighted up a stogie after his meal and called for a drink.

"You prob'bly don't know who this Peaceful Johnson is, I reckon," he said to Hatter. But Hatter, in that serene way, allowed as how he knew who this Johnson was. So Gabby was robbed of the chance to tell about

the misnamed Johnson, a sawed-off little demon with the guns who hired himself out to clean up bad pueblos. He had contributed to the population of more than one Boothill a dead shot who knew no quarter once a man drew on him. He hated a lawbreaker the way the average human hated sidewinders.

"He stopped off at Root's barroom down the line," Gabby said half to himself. "Here's Tooker in town—'course, he's reformed. But Peaceful mightn't know that yet... And they's Black Dan over there. Say-y..." His little eyes glittered anticipantly. "If Peaceful knew..."

"Be back in a coupla minutes," he told the drummer. "Watch my drink fer me." Again he trotted out into the torch-glare of the road.

IT WAS MORE than a couple of minutes before he returned; and he was mopping his sweat-leaking face with a wad of red bandanna when he did. But he wore the look of a man with a job well done.

"Well, did you see Peaceful Johnson?" Hatter asked, voice steely with just the hint of a sneer.

"Not exactly." Gabby winked wisely. "But the message was passed to him, all right, all right. An' you should uh seen his face when he got the word. I thought he was a-going to spill his whisky. He-he..."

"You're brewing a reg'lar devil's broth, huh?" the drummer said.

"They'll be some danged fancy fireworks afore sundown," Gabby Sheets said. "Always was a smart un, slicker 'n slobbers, if I do say so myself. 'S how I got along all my life. No killings or holdups fer me. "I—"

"Did you ever meet up with Mark Reddows?" the drummer asked. "He wasn't no outlaw; he was—"

"Sure, a U.S. marshal. I know. Hey, Pete, let's have some drinks. Oh, I knew 'em *all* in my time, mister. Sure, Reddows. Dead now. He—" He broke off abruptly to blow his nose in the red bandana.

"Yeah, died strangely, it seems," Hatter finished it. "It was down on the Rio, around about Putnam. He was trying to find out how those wanted men were slipping back and forth across the Line so easy-like. And he just plumb disappeared. Never even found his body." Hatter looked at Gabby Sheets over the top of his glass. "Your health, amigo."

Gabby cocked an eyebrow. "Say, you seem to know a heap about that Reddows' gent." There was a hesitant note in his voice.

Hatter shrugged, face with a certain set look now. "I sorta knew his folks, his paw and ma and his wife. Reddows' had a baby son, too."

"Oh, I see. Name reminds me of old Pegleg Renson, the horsethief. I know a few stories about him. Once, when he was orey-eyed, he stole a sheriff's hoss right outa the shed behind the jail and—"

"Did you ever meet up with a man named—" Hatter began.

Gabby's eyes swept to the doorway again as the batwings creaked. He awaited the arrival of either Peaceful Johnson or Jim Tooker, maybe both. But the man who rolled in was so broad and stout he looked stubby though he wasn't short. He was a barrel of flesh, double-chinned, with a great hooked beak in the middle of a leathery face. Several men along the bar nodded. And Pete the drink wrangler hustled up to the front end of the counter with a hearty "Howdy, Hellifer! Just riding through?"

Hellifer answered in a husky whisper of a voice, the result of an accident to his throat, as he rolled his hulk to the bar. And Gabby Sheets shook with restrained glee. "That's Ab Hellifer," he explained to the drummer. "Deputy from over Phoenix Forks way. He—"

"He's the lawman who used to be an outlaw, isn't he?"

"That's right. And he hates Peaceful Johnson like sin; has for years. Seems Johnson drilled Hellifer's cousin when he was cleaning out Headstone down on Pony Creek a long time ago. Hellifer's always sworn his cousin was no outlaw, never belonged to the Pony Hills bunch down that way. Hellifer's

promised more than once to ventilate Peaceful on sight if ever their trails should cross. He—"

At the head of the bar, having tossed off his second shot of forty rod, Hellifer clapped on his hat and picked up his gauntlets, prepared to hit the trail. Gabby snaked out a thin arm and caught at Pete the barkeep's sleeve in passing.

"Pete, don't say I said so. And just sorta whisper it to Hellifer. But tell him Peaceful Johnson—Peaceful Johnson, yeah—is due here any moment."

The stupid-faced Pete knuckled a horse jaw, then shrugged, and clumped back up to the front. He leaned over the counter and whispered the message. Hellifer's bleached eyebrows shot up. Then he put his gloves back down. "Reckon I will have 'nother drink," he husked.

"He-he-he..." Gabby had to hold himself to restrain his glees, tongue darting along his lips as if he could taste it. "Black Dan Harper... Tooker...Peaceful Johnson...and now, Hellifer... This is going to be great. Why, this'll be a reg'lar killer's carnival... Hey, Pete, some drinks!"

THERE WAS a fleeting sneer in Hatter's eyes. But Gabby, dumping down his drink in glee, already a little orey-eyed failed to catch it.

"Did you ever meet up with Bill Thoms, fella?"

"Why sure!" Gabby's triumph had already gone to his head; he knew everybody on every owlhoot trail in the cockeyed country. "Big tall fella. Red-headed, I think, an'—"

"And I think you're a big-mouthed fourflusher," Hatter put in coldly. His eyes were as hard as chunks of rock suddenly.

Gabby spilled part of his unfinished drink in slapping it back down on the bar. "What in blazes do you mean? I knew those gents an'—"

"Because you said you knew Bill Thoms. Well—you don't. Because, blab-mouth, I'm Bill Thoms!... Want me to show you papers to prove—"

"Well, a man makes mistakes once in a while," Gabby put in hurriedly. "Mebbe I was think of another jasper an'—"

"I don't figure you knew any of them fellas you named. You just heard stories about 'em—mebbe met somebody who *had* known them. But you—" The drummer spat on the floor to show his disgust.

Gabby went crimson, lips working as he momentarily half choked. Others had turned to watch and listen. Gabby was on his mettle. "Well, I could tell you things! I've been around. Them fellas knew me danged well. I—"

"How in tarnation could one man know so many gents of their breed?" Hatter sneered. "I been around too. But—" He laughed jeeringly. Others joined in, Pete the barkeep guffawing like crazy.

"Smart jasper, ain't you?" the stung Gabby flung at Hatter, waving a finger under his nose. "Let me tell you something. I was in a—a sorta business down there nigh to Putnam at the Border. For years. I saw them fellas come and go. Had a little bar and eating place, sorta. I—"

The batwings had parted again. Jim Tooker, a medium-sized gent, hair frosted at the temples, good-looking despite a scar at the side of his jaw, stood in them some seconds, looking around. Gabby's eyes danced as he forgot his own troubles. Now the fireworks should come. Tooker advanced, walking with a slight limp, steering a course to the table where Black Dan Harper sat. He walked up behind him and dropped a hand on his shoulders, said something low. Harper looked up, then both men shook hands warmly.

Gabby goggled with a sort of choking sound. Hatter took him by the arm and turned him back. "Bar and eating place, huh? Don't tell me it was that joint out by the crossing, tinhorn?"

Gabby's head thrust out in rage. "Yes, yes it was, that place, that was mine!" he cried shrilly. "Them fellas used to stop off there—"

Again the batwings creaked and a shadow fell over the floor. It was stocky Peaceful Johnson with his white-handled tied-down guns that looked as if they'd drag the undersized man down. He looked around warily for some moments, staring right at Black Dan and Tooker who stood talking. He glanced away. Gabby's eyes buzzed half out of his head, jaw sliding slack. Johnson approached the bar at a point a few yards down from Hellifer. There was no missing the latter's huge girth.

"Now, now..." Gabby breathed anticipantly.

"Best whisky you got in the house, barkeep," Peaceful Johnson ordered "And set up a fresh drink there for Mr. Hellifer. Hot day, eh?"

Gabby swayed slightly and wiped a hand over his eyes. He couldn't believe it. Maybe Peaceful hadn't recognized Tooker and Black Dan yet. Still, he was buying Hellifer a drink and...

HATTER WENT ON again. "You had that joint at the crossing outside uh Putnam! Bah! Why that was a fairly sizable place. They rented rooms upstairs and—"

"Danged right I know it! I rented 'em, all right. I—"

"Don't keep giving me them windies, two-bit," Hatter said, sneering broadly. "Fella called Tom Parr had that place and—"

"Parr was the handle I was going under then—for—for certain reasons. Sabe?" the enraged Gabby flung back. "Now—you see!"

Hatter nodded slowly, right hand dropping into a coat pocket. "Reckon I do, Parr... You see we found out, after the place was abandoned, that beneath the place ran an underground stream that had about dried up. Its course came to the surface a few hundred yards from the Rio itself, making a regular underground tunnel."

"That's right. That—" Gabby flung a hand against his mouth. He saw in Hatter's unwavering unblinking eyes. something he didn't like. "I—well—" He picked up his drink shakily.

"That's how those owlhooters and killers were slipping back and forth across the Border," Hatter picked it up, taut-voiced. "How they were never caught—thanks to the tunnel of the underground creek at *your* place! And that's where Mark Reddows that marshal was headed when he was never seen again, Parr! We been looking for the owner and now—"

His right hand came out of his pocket, flashing the badge of a U. S. marshal as he started to draw from under his coat with his left. Gabby Sheets, the one-time Parr, stood slumped, the picture of defeat. There was a flash as he hurled his whisky glass. Glass and contents caught Marshal Bill Thoms, posing as a travelling drummer, full in the face. Gabby turned and darted away.

Thoms' Patterson Colts smashed out. But, blinded by the raw whisky, his shot was wild. The scuttling Gabby twisted around and hammered a slug into the marshal's left leg, dropping him to a knee for a moment. Breaking from the bar, Peaceful Johnson jumped at Gabby from the right. Then the manhunter went asprawl as his boot struck a cuspidor the careless swamper had left a couple of feet from a post. Gabby slapped another slug in the marshal's direction, then took off for the door again. But Hellifer, moving with incredible speed for a man his heft, was already there, blocking them. He had a gun cleared, too.

"Stand back, coyote!" he warned in the husky voice. "I—"

Luck seemed all on Gabby's side. Two orey-eyed jaspers, coming in from the street, slammed the doors inward boisterously. Big Hellifer was hit hard in the back of the head and knocked off balance. Gabby leaped on him like a crazed little wildcat and hammered him to his knees with a gun barrel blow. Bill Thoms' bullet just nicked Gabby's hat brim, a couple of inches from his brains. Gabby batted one of the drunks from his path.

There was another gun report in the barroom, really two simultaneous shots as Black Dan Harper and Tooker triggered in unision. Little Gabby was lifted up on his toes as he faced the street, took two short steps, then crumpled in his tracks with blood spurting from a gash at the side of his scalp. Black Dan and Jim Tooker looked at each other, wondering who'd gotten him.

GABBY SHEETS, the one-time Parr, sat propped in a chair, a white rag binding the gash in his scalp. He had only been creased, knocked cold temporarily by the slug that had not injured the skull itself. Pete held another slug of whisky to his lips. Gabby gulped but his eyes still held that dazed uncomprehending look. He gazed around at the killers he had drawn together to detonate a shooting fracas, Black Dan, and Tooker, and Peaceful Johnson, and Hellifer. Then he looked up at Bill Thoms.

"But they never did anything," Gabby whined.

Thoms smiled coldly, "For your information, Parr, Black Dan Harper was cleared of the Ajo stage hold-up last month when another man confessed to it. As for him and Jim Tooker, they patched up their feud just a week ago in Poker Flats. Peaceful here knew Tooker had gone straight and that Black Dan had been cleared—so he had nothing against them. For Hellifer—well, a spell back he found out for certain his cousin—whom Peaceful had shot—had been riding with the Pony Hills bunch after all. So that was that."

"Holy Pete," Gabby muttered weakly. "Just—just like blank cartridges."

"But I didn't draw one with you, Parr," Thoms said grimly. "After the sawbones comes to take a look at you, we're taking a ride, a long ride. And you won't be back—ever..."

•

A Tempestuous Feature Novel of The Old West

BEWARE OF DOLLY DONDYKE

by Rex Whitechurch

You'll find it in the current issue of

REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

NEVER CALL HIM WILLIE

By Ben Frank

No matter how fast he ran, or how far, Willie couldn't get away from himself, or from his weakness. He had to face it and fight it here —wherever that "here" might be at any given moment.

Bim Hardesty took a bullet in the shoulder.

WILLIE Hoffman's hands shook so that he had trouble shutting the clasps on the little black bag in which he carried his piano-tuning tools. They shook because he needed a drink, needed it badly. With the drinks that a piano-tuning job in a saloon would bring, he could forget the things that he'd run away from. Could forget that he'd been named Willie, a name that he hated with a cold ferocity.

The black bag gripped in his sweaty fingers, he turned from the battered piano, a medium tall young man with haunted dark eyes and a lean, unhappy face. Outside the Stag

Saloon, the sun glared against the dust of the empty street; Dry Springs was in for another scorcher.

He stumbled past Sheriff Milt Hopper and Fred Freeman, owner of the Big Star spread. He put the bag on the bar and picked up the glass that the barkeep had already filled for him.

Sheriff Hopper was saying, "The Hardesty brothers shot it out with the sheriff of Action County day before yesterday. Bim, the younger'n, carried away the sheriff's lead."

Willie downed his third drink and faced the sheriff and Fred Freeman. He was beginning to forget that he'd ever run away; he scrubbed a grimy hand across his face, shook the curly brown hair out of his blurring eyes, and tried to stand very straight. "Jus' call me Bill," he said thickly. "Bill Hoffman. The bes' damn' piano-tuner in the state!"

No one paid any attention to him.

"Them Hardestys need corralin'," Fred Freeman growled. "The Action bank makes the fifth they've took in a row."

"The sixth," Hopper corrected. "They've killed four men."

Willie squared his shoulders, jutted his lean chin. "Lis'en to me," he said belligerently. "If anyone ever calls me Willie again, I'll bus' 'em in the nose. I'm Bill! Understand? Tougher'n bull-hide an'—"

The sheriff grinned up at him and spread a dodger out on the table, where he and Freeman sat over bottles of beer. A trace of sun came through a front window and touched the scowling faces on the dodger. "Sure, Willie," he said good-naturedly, "we understand."

"As tough as Willie is," the barkeep grinned, "looks like he'd go after the Hardestys fer the reward, sheriff."

"Not a bad idea, frien'," Willie agreed.

"I'd rather he'd stick to piano-tunin'," Freeman said. "That pi-annie out at my ranch needs tunin' the wust way, so the missus says. She—"

"Let me see them pictures," Willie said, stumbling to the table, "so's if I met up with 'em—" He attempted a whistle and missed. "Five thousand dollars reward!" he read aloud. "Why, that'd be enough for me to start up a music store an'—'Black hair. Usually need shaving.' Jip Hardesty has a scar on his left cheek." He straightened and glared about the room. "Did somebody call me Willie. I'll bus'—"

"There's the stage," Sheriff Hopper said, shoving to his feet. "Looks like a lady passenger."

Willie leaned against the table and watched the stage stir the deep dust of the street.

"I'm Bill Hoffman," he said unsteadily. "Not Willie. If I ever hear anybody call me Willie—"

HIS VOICE died in his throat, and the shock of what he saw squeezed the blood from his face. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Sure enough, his eyes hadn't fooled him. Mary Dunn had climbed out of the stage. And it wasn't her ghost; she was a real live Mary Dunn, standing there slender and straight, talking with the driver, her bare golden head shining in the sunlight. Willie felt the cold sweat ooze out on his face, and the drinks he'd had he no longer felt.

"I'm goin' to the country today, Fred," he husked. "Maybe I'll go out to your ranch and tune that piano."

He stumbled to the bar and caught up the bag. There was only one thought in his mind as he groped his way blindly toward the rear door of the saloon. To get as far away from Dry Springs as possible as quickly as he could—and without letting the girl see him.

The door gave him trouble, and he cursed it under his breath. Once in the alley, he hurried along past the litter of tincans and ashes and warped rain barrels to the back door of the livery stable. A few minutes later, Willie Hoffman was well on his way out of Dry Springs in a rented buggy, drawn by a high-stepping gray horse.

He didn't look back; there was too much fear and shame in him for that. He didn't want to see that golden head gleaming in the sun again.

He didn't want to think back, either, but he couldn't keep from doing that and remembering how he'd run away once before. Inwardly he cursed himself for that moment of weakness a few weeks back when he'd written to his aunt in the East, telling her where he was and that he was all right. He knew now that his aunt must have passed his letter on to the girl.

Mary Dunn! She had fine strong hands and soft red lips and a deep steadiness in her blue eyes. She had expected great things of Willie Hoffman, and he'd had to run away because it wasn't in him to do these great things she expected.

Thinking of all this, he cursed aloud, his hoarse voice a low hiss against the rattle of the old buggy. How, he thought, can a man with the name of Willie do anything but fail! Weary Willie. Willie the Weavel. Willie the Weakling. Gawd, how he'd always hated the name! His cursing stopped, and his eyes turned sick. If he could only do something once in his life to make up for his failures.

HE ROUNDED the south slope of Sage Hill and came to the Peck homestead. In the distance, he saw an approaching rider on a large black horse. The horse was unfamiliar, so he guessed the rider be a stranger.

Remembering he'd promised to tune the Peck's old square piano sometime, he stopped and went in. While he worked, he saw the rider through the window, a big man wearing a slouch hat. The man went on and disappeared around the base of Sage Hill. Willie, the old fear and mind sickness gnawing at his heart, didn't give the rider a second thought.

Mrs. Peck, a thin, un-well woman, invited him to stay for dinner, but there was no appetite in Willie Hoffman that day. He collected his pay, thinking of it in terms of the drinks it would buy, gathered up his tools and stuffed them into the black bag.

"Shore much obliged, Willie," Mr. Peck said around his pipe stem. "The wife don't get out much, an' this piano means a lot to her."

Willie picked up the bag and hurried out. He didn't want the man and woman to see his face, not the way it looked after the man had called him Willie. To him the name meant unhappiness and failure. He was a failure; always had been. And a coward; when the going got tough, he ran. Like that night three years before when he'd got his first break.

The concert hall had been packed with the right people. Important people. Willie had started to walk out on the vast stage toward the piano, and something had smashed up inside him. He knew then that he couldn't face those people, that it wasn't in him to be a concert pianist. He'd fled from the hall, from Mary Dunn, and had taken the first train west. Now he was Willie, the piano tuner, who drank up his earnings and tried to get people to call him Bill.

He tossed the bag into the buggy, climbed in and sent the gray horse at a fast clip along the trail. The black thoughts in his mind dulled his senses to the things about him. He didn't see the horseman trailing him. He didn't even know anyone was within a mile of him until he reached a lonely spot in the trail, and the man rode up beside the buggy.

"Just a minute, Doc," the man said, his voice scratchy.

Startled, Willie pulled the horse to a stop. The man, he saw, carried two guns with the handles forward. Willie didn't know much about gunmen, but he'd heard that some men were lightning fast with a cross-arm draw.

"I was just on my way fer a doc," the man went on, "when I saw yuh go into that cabin back there. So I hung around back of that hill, waitin' fer yuh. I got a mighty sick man on my hands, Doc."

"I'm sorry," Willie said, "but I'm not a doctor."

The man's cold gray eyes narrowed. One hand crossed to a gun butt. The other slid the slouch hat back on a head of oily black hair.

"Yeah?" he lipped. "I saw yore

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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medicine bag; yuh ain't foolin' nobody, Doc."

Willie's eyes moved up from the man's gunhand to his face. He'd seen that stubble covered face someplace before. Black hair. Scar on left cheek. Suddenly he remembered, and a tight fear shook him. A few hours before, he'd seen that face on the sheriff's dodger. This man was Jip Hardesty. And his brother had carried away a bullet as a result of a fight with the sheriff of Action County.

Then Willie understood something else. Doctors usually carried small black bags; his bag, in which he carried his tools, had fooled Jip Hardesty. He'd mistaken him, Willie Hoffman, for a doctor.

A twisted smile sat on the outlaw's face. "I'll just tie my hoss on behind yore buggy, Doc," he said, "an' ride with yuh. In fact, I'll even do the drivin'."

"No!" Willie choked. "I'm—"

A gun leaped into the man's hand. "Look," he said flatly, "I ain't takin' no fer an answer! My brother was cleanin' his gun, an' it went off. He's got a bullet in—"

"I'm not—" Willie began.

SOMETHING in the man's eyes froze his blood and paralyzed his vocal chords. Here was a man who had killed before and would kill again at the least provocation.

Willie felt the sweat under his arms. This was like living through a drunken nightmare, or like remembering back to your past and the mess you'd made of it. But even if he'd made a mess of things, he wasn't quite ready to die. As long as a man lived, he had a chance to find a little happiness, even if it was only in getting drunk and insisting that people call him Bill instead of Willie. Someway, he had to get out of this jam, had to make the outlaw understand that he wasn't a doctor before it was too late.

He found his voice. "I can't do anything for you," he began; "you see—"

"Let's git things straight, Doc," the man interrupted harshly. "I'm Jip Hardesty. Mebbe that name

means somethin' to yuh, huh? My brother, Bim, took a lawman's bullet in his shoulder day 'fore yesterday. He's at our hide-out in Big Hole Canyon, an' that bullet's gotta come out 'fore he can travel. Yo're the man who's gonna take it out!"

Willie felt a wave of sickness strike him. The man had told him too much to let him go now. There was just one way to stay alive a little longer, and that was to play along in the role of a medico. As long as a man lived, he still had a chance. Even if it was a mighty slim one.

He fought down the sickness, remembering how he'd wished for a chance to redeem himself. "I didn't come prepared to dig out a bullet," he said. "I'm fresh out of chloroform; that old lady back there—"

"We won't worry none about that," Jip Hardesty declared tightly. "Us Hardestys can take a little pain. Besides, Bim wouldn't run a chance of lettin' anybody put him to sleep."

Again Willie looked into the cold gray eyes and felt the quick death that lay in them raise goose-pimples on his skin. "I'll do the best I can," he said.

"Now, Doc, I reckon yo're talkin' sense," the outlaw said. "Yuh do a good job on Bim, an' we'll let yuh go as soon as he can ride. But"—the man's voice iced up, "if anything goes wrong, I'll feed yuh to the buzzards!"

"I can't promise anything," Willie shivered.

"I ain't askin' fer a promise," Jip cut in; "I'm just tellin' yuh what's what!"

The man slid from the saddle and climbed into the buggy beside Willie. He was a big man and took up a lot of room. Willie squeezed away from him. He didn't like the man's sweaty smell; he didn't like anything about him.

"I'll drive," the outlaw said, and shook out the lines.

THEY TURNED left, heading for the Big Hole country. The going was rough, the sage choked trail rutted and rocky. The brush thinned and gave way to browning

[*Turn Page*]

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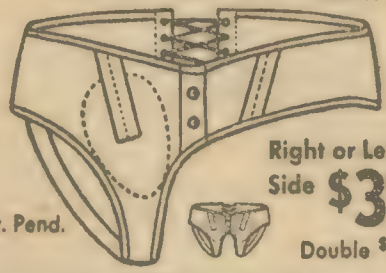

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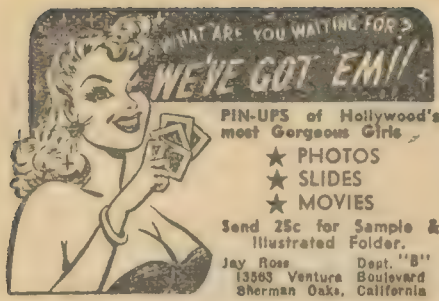

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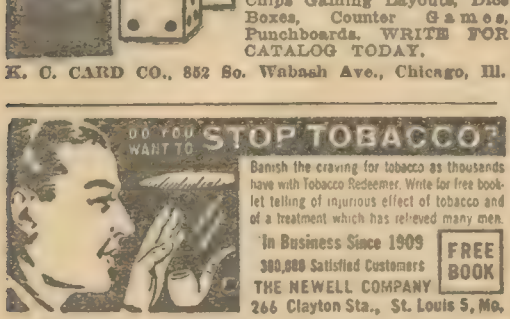

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blue-stem, which in turn gave way to the stunted pines that rimmed the desolate Big Hole Canyon. The sun passed the zenith and began to settle toward the west.

Jip Hardesty pulled the horse to a stop at the narrow mouth of the canyon. "From here on, Doc," he said, "we'll ride. My hoss'll carry double."

Willie picked up the black bag and climbed down from the buggy. His knees were weak, and he caught at a lightning-spiked tree trunk for support. He needed a drink, needed it badly; a drink always seemed to give him strength and courage. With three drinks, he was no longer Willie. He was Bill, and felt as if he could whip his weight in wildcats.

"Up yuh go, Doc," Hardesty said, and boosted him into the saddle on the big black horse.

The man climbed on behind and took charge of the reins. "Just keep one hand on the saddle horn, Doc," he said, "an' hold that bag with the other. I reckon as long as yo're doin' that yuh won't git into trouble."

The ride to the hideout lasted long enough for Willie to do a lot of thinking. None of it was good. There'd been an unhappy childhood, living with an aunt, hours spent over a piano keyboard, all the other kids calling him a sissy. He'd tried licking the kids, but had failed hopelessly.

"Willie the Weakling," they'd dubbed him.

Then there'd been Mary Dunn. She'd understood him and had given him courage and hope. "Someday," she'd said, "you'll get a break, Willie. You'll get to play for people who'll recognize your ability."

That day had come, and he'd muffed it. He'd run away to lose himself in the West. But he'd even failed at that; he'd been a fool enough to tell people that his name was Willie. And once he'd written back to his aunt—and now Mary Dunn had found him. Mary who understood, but whom he couldn't face.

"This it it, Doc," the outlaw said, pulling up short.

Nestled under a cliff, well hidden behind a screen of crowded young pines, stood a crude cabin. It marked the end of the road for Willie Hoffman, and he knew it. Once the Hardestys discovered he was a piano-tuner instead of a doctor, it would be curtains for him. In most ways, he reckoned, it didn't matter. Only, if he were Bill, not Willie, he might catch the two men off guard and collect the five thousand reward. A man who could do that would be able to face a girl who'd come two thousand miles to see him. With that money, he could make a fresh start and offer the girl a little something of what she deserved.

He slid to the ground, gripping the black bag fiercely. Jip Hardesty slid down beside him, towering over him.

Willie looked up into the cold gray eyes. "Call me Bill," he said huskily. "From now on it's Bill—not Wi—Doc."

"Why'n hell do yuh want me to call yuh Bill?"

"I can work better when people call me Bill."

He turned, pushed his way along the limb-tangled path to the cabin and went inside. Jip followed closely, his hand resting on a slick gun butt. Bill Hoffman's eyes moved about the room. Two chairs. A round, sagging table. A box cuboard. Wash stand. Rusty monkey stove. A door leading into a second room.

"Bim's in the other room," Jip said, and shoved Bill through the door.

THE WOUNDED man looked up out of narrowed, feverish eyes. He lay on a rough bunk against the wall, the light from a small window slanting against his whiskery face. A crude, blood-soaked bandage crossed his left shoulder, and he gripped a sixgun in his right fist. The gun pointed unwaveringly at Bill's sucked-in-middle.

"I found a sawbones," Jip said; "he says to call him Bill."

"Bill," Bim Hardesty gritted, "if yuh don't do a good job on me, yo're life won't be worth a plugged nickel!"

[*Turn Page*]

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who want to write

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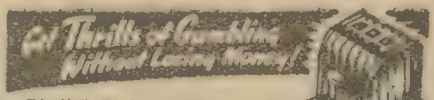

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Bill set the black bag on an upended box near the bunk. "I've heard that before," he said.

He unsnapped the bag and opened it. His fingers were steady as he drew out a small bottle of machine oil, hiding the label in the palm of his hand.

"A glass of water, please," he said, hoping he sounded very professional.

Jip holstered his gun and went into the other room. Bim's gun followed Bill's movements as he pulled a pair of gleaming scissors from the bag and whacked off a long strip of the bed sheet.

"What's that stuff?" Bim asked, his suspicious eyes on the bottle.

"Medicine," Bill answered. "A little in a glass of water—"

"Look," Bim said harshly, "I ain't takin' nothin' that'll put me to sleep."

"This won't put you to sleep," Bill promised.

"What're yuh gonna do with the bed sheet?"

"Bandages. You're goin' to bleed considerable. And it's goin' to hurt."

"I can stand the hurt," Bim said, "but I better not bleed too much."

Jip came in with a tincup of water. Bill put two drops of machine oil in it and stirred it briskly with a pair of long tweezers he'd fished from the black bag. Bim drank the mixture and made a face.

"Tastes oily," he said.

"That's because you've got some fever," Bill said. He glanced around the room. "We'll need hot water an' a stout rope."

"Why the rope?" Bim wanted to know.

"To tie you so you can't move while I'm takin' out that bullet," Bill said.

"Look, Doc," Bim wheezed, "yuh ain't gonna tie me down!"

"Got to," Bill said. "If you're not tied down, you'll jump when I go after that bullet, an' I might puncture an artery. Or hit a nerve."

"I won't jump," Bim said flatly. "I don't need to be tied down."

BILL SHRUGGED and closed the black bag. "You say you'll kill

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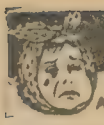

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me if I don't do a good job, an' yet you won't co-operate with me so's I can fix you up. Why don't you pull that trigger an' get it over with."

Jip turned on his brother. "I reckon we'll have to string along with Bill," he said flatly. "Yuh don't need to worry about bein' tied, Bim. I'll be right here with a gun on the Doc an' a knife ready to cut yuh loose."

Beads of sweat stood out on the wounded man's white face. "Why'd I have to pick up this slug?" he mumbled. "Why— Okay, Doc, have it yore way. But don't forget, there's lead waitin' fer yuh if things don't work out!"

"Keep him covered, Bim," Jip said, "while I get a fire goin' an' run down a rope."

He turned heavily and left the room.

Bill opened the bag again, got out the scissors a length of piano wire, the tweezers and a razor-edged knife that he used in cutting felts for piano hammers.

Bim looked a little frightened, but his gun was steady. "What would happen, Doc," he husked, "if I decided to let that bullet stay in me?"

"Lockjaw," Bill said omniously.

"What's the wire fer?"

"To probe for the bullet."

Bill dug out a pair of pliers and made a loop on the end of the bright steel wire.

"Doc," Bim asked after a moment, "yuh've dug out bullets before, ain't yuh?"

"Dozens of 'em," Bill answered. "An' call me Bill, you confounded thief!"

"Listen," Bim roared, "yuh can't call—"

"Take it easy," Bill said; "you're a sick man."

Jip returned to the room with a horse-hair lariat. "The water's on," he said, "an' here's a rope."

Bill took the rope, passed it under the bunk and over Bim's long body; then tied the man's hands and legs securely to the corners of the bunk.

"That ought to hold you," he said. "Now for the hot water."

Jip turned toward the door.

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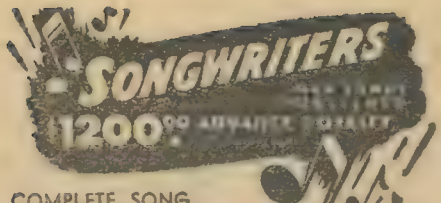

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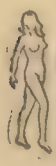

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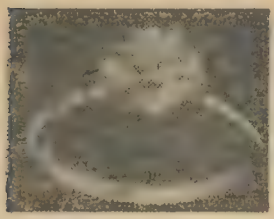

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"Wait," Bim croaked. "Tied like this, I'm as helpless as a baby. While yo're out, Jip, this jasper might stick them scissors clean through me an' beat it out the window."

Bill picked up the strip he'd cut from the sheet and began to fold it into a long, narrow bandage. "You can still yell, can't you?" he said carelessly.

"Shore," Jip nodded. "Keep an' eye on him, Bim. If he starts cuttin' up, sing out, an' I'll come a-runnin'."

He headed for the door, but turned back, a crooked grin on his face. "I reckon I won't leave Bim's cutter here fer yuh, Bill," he said, picking up Bim's gun and sticking it under his belt.

With another grin, he turned and walked out of the room.

BILL FELT a wave of weakness hit him. He'd sort of counted on getting hold of that gun, even if he wasn't much when it came to shooting. Now he'd have to figure out something else. Pronto!

He moved to the bed and grinned down at the bound man. In the other room, he heard Jip stirring up the fire. Outside, a bluejay flew past the window, lit in a pine and began to scold a squirrel.

"Now," Bill said, leaning over with the bandage held above Bim's stubble-covered face, "I'll put the bandage on like this."

His hands moved quickly. The bandage slapped across Bim's mouth, tightening, shutting off his attempt to yell. Deftly, Bill knotted the bandage behind the outlaw's head. Bim Hardesty stared up out of burning, eloquent eyes but he didn't say

[*Turn To Page* 180]

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anything. He couldn't, not with that strip of sheet clamping his lips shut over his teeth.

In the other room, Jip noisily stuffed fuel into the stove. "The water's beginnin' to steam some," he called.

"It's got to boil," Bill called back.

He caught up the looped piano wire in one hand and his tuning hammer in the other. Silently he glided to the door.

"She's boilin'," Jip said.

"Hurry it in here," Bill said.

Listening intently, he laid the steel loop in front of the door, gripped the end of the wire in his left hand, held the tuning hammer ready with his right. His heart pounded wildly, while a trickle of sweat ran along the side of his nose. Jip's boot heels clipped across the floor toward the door.

"Call me Bill!" Bill Hoffman kept saying over and over like a prayer. "Bill—the best piano-tuner in the world!"

Jip Hardesty came through the door. He set one foot down inside the wire loop and lifted the other foot for his next step. Bill Hoffman jerked the wire.

The kettle of boiling water slid from the outlaw's fingers, crashed to the floor. Steam from the spilled water lifted into the air like a small cloud. The man struggled to free his foot, to keep his balance, and failed in both attempts. Cursing, he went down on hands and knees. He lifted his black head and reached for a gun. Bill hit him then with the tuning hammer. Hard.

Jip Hardesty crumpled limply. Even if the water on the floor was hot, he didn't mind. In fact, he was past knowing or caring about it at the moment.

On the bunk, Bim struggled vainly to free himself, but Bill had done a good job with the lariat. He found another rope and did an equally good job of tying the unconscious Jip.

"Just call me Bill," he said to no one in particular. "The first person who calls me Willie is in for trouble!"

He pulled his hat down over his curly hair and went out to where Jip Hardesty had left his black horse. A little later, he rode up out of the canyon and exchanged the horse for the buggy.

DARKNESS WAS settling fast when Bill Hoffman walked into the sheriff's office in Dry Springs.

Milt Hopper sat behind his desk, the oil lamp throwing his bulky shadow flat against the wall. He looked up, grinned. "About time yuh was gettin' back to town," he said. "There's a young lady here, lookin' for yuh, Will—"

Something in Bill's face stopped him abruptly.

"Never call me Willie!" the younger man said tightly. "It's Bill. Get it? Bill Hoffman. I just stopped by to tell you that I captured the Hardesty brothers an' left 'em tied up in their hide-out in Big Hole Canyon. As soon as I talk to this young lady, I'll show you where that hide-out is."

"Hold on a minute, Bill—" Hopper began.

"Bill!"

It was Mary Dunn's voice. And she'd called him Bill!

He turned and saw her standing in the doorway, slender, straight as an arrow, her bright hair shining like gold in the lamp light. Heart pounding, he moved a step toward her, and she ran toward him.

Sheriff Milt Hopper, even if he was mighty excited about Bill's capturing the Hardestys, still had presence of mind enough to know that a meeting of this kind should be a private affair. So he got up quickly and went into another room.

But he couldn't help over-hearing a few things. Something about a man failing at one thing, but succeeding at another. About how this part of the country was ripe for a good music store and—no doubt—tomorrow would be as good a day for a wedding as any that you could pick out.

●

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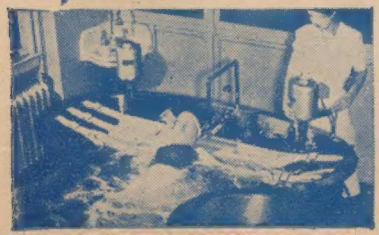

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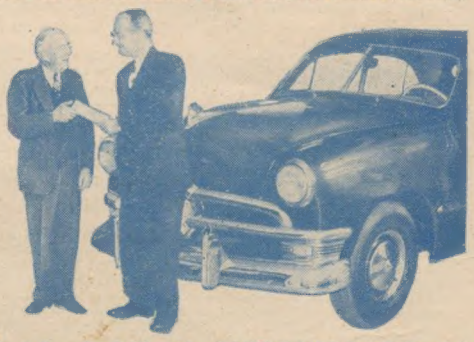

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